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THE SPORT OF SILVER BEND



OR,

The Man with the Black Mask.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DERRINGER DECK," "HANDS UP,"
"SEVEN SHOT STEVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN WITH GENERAL PRINCIPLES.

SILVER BEND was a misnomer.

Not but what there was silver to be found to a limited extent in the neighborhood, but gold was the main product of the mines, and the idea of any one seriously attempting to win fortune through the cheaper metal would have simply seemed ridiculous.

But Silver Bend it had been named; and Silver Bend it will probably remain until the end of the chapter.

"HANDS UP THERE TILL WE SEE WHAT HAS BEEN GOING ON HERE," CALLED OUT
THE SILVER BEND SPORT.

The times there, however, were none the less lively; and the city had a reputation which extended beyond the mountains on the one side and the plains on the other. There was wealth there; and there was "fun" moreover. The place was rough enough already, and when the road-agents began to operate in the neighborhood the surroundings became all that could be wished, for any one who wanted to find a spot where the Wild West could be found in all its woolliness.

The nearer Nellie Neville and her mother drew to the town the more fully they were satisfied that the reality would surpass their original fears when they first began to think seriously of the journey.

Not that they were afraid; but it seemed like tempting Providence for two unprotected females to undertake a mission such as theirs.

When they reached Glory Gulch, and had a ride of some thirty miles only between them and their destination, Mrs. Neville showed more nervousness than ever; which was in marked contrast to her daughter, whose spirits were rising in spite of the last dangers between them and their goal.

"It strikes me you are borrowing a vast deal of trouble," was the remark of the younger woman, as the two settled themselves in the stage, with something like a sigh of satisfaction from each that they were apparently to have the whole of the inside to themselves.

"I do not suppose any one in the world knows of our object—I am sure I do not—and if they did, who is there who would be apt to attempt to interfere with it? And as for this last straw, as you call it—what have we to fear from the man who has adopted the very queer name of General Principles? From what I have heard of him he would be more than likely to do his best to help us along when he found how poverty-stricken we really were."

"Better to die at once than to run the risks. You are young yet, and cannot understand. Oh, I do so dread to have you learn wisdom before your time."

"Ha, ha! I may be young yet, and innocent; yet perhaps I am not as absolutely guileless as you would make me. Rest easy. If we meet the enemy I do not of course expect to fight, but there will be a way to circumvent. And meantime, why not take the satisfaction that I am doing out of the fact that we are nearing our journey's end?"

"I wish I could," groaned Mrs. Neville, closing her eyes with an effort to shut out the mental picture as effectually as she did the material scene.

"It is not like me, I know. If I had for a moment thought my nerves would so fail me I would never have had the courage to undertake the journey. If I could only sleep now, and wake up in Silver Bend, I think it would make the rest so much easier."

"Sleep, then. I see nothing to prevent it unless you are not in earnest. I shall make no promises, but if you remain awake I suspect it will not be very long until you hear me snore."

The conversation was not very brilliant, but it served its purpose. The excitement consequent upon the start was smoothed over; and in the end Mrs. Neville slumbered softly.

The two were handsome, each after her own style of beauty.

Mrs. Neville was wonderfully young for her age, which could not have been far off of forty. Her features were delicate, her hair the softest of light browns, her eyes a liquid blue, while her figure had just reached perfection.

Nellie was taller than her mother, and of an entirely different style of beauty.

In the first place, she was charming through the force of youth and good health. Beyond that she had dark eyes and hair, a swaying, supple figure, a firm hand, a daintily shaped foot that was not too small for the frame under which it was placed.

Mentally, she had resources beyond those of the elder lady, and the longer she traveled in this *terra incognita* the more self-reliant she became.

The statement she made in regard to not understanding the object of their journey may seem ridiculous, but it was none the less true.

She knew somewhat of the mission on which her mother had started, but how it was hoped that it would end was still a mystery. Beyond the fact that it had something to do with her dead father she could not guess. It might be there was money involved, though at times she had a fancy there was a spice of vengeance in the journey and its aims.

It seemed a trifle ludicrous to think of her mother giving way to such a passion as revenge—and yet, who could say? Not even Nellie, who had been her sole companion almost from the first dawn of infancy.

Some such thoughts as these were passing through the mind of the younger woman as she watched the face of her mother from the opposite seat.

"Really, it does seem too strange," she thought, her eyes fixed on the gentle-looking face, and the slight form reclining in so peaceful an attitude.

"I cannot imagine what has put such an idea

in my head. Of all mild-mannered women mother is the mildest. The very idea of her undertaking a journey of this kind is supremely nonsensical, and when I try to believe her anything but what I have always seen her I think I must be going madder than I try to make her out. I begin to think perhaps I never should have yielded; that perhaps—well, just a little, don't you know? Good heavens! Suppose she was going crazy, after all?"

It was not the first time such a suggestion had presented itself to the mind of the young lady; but never before had the idea struck her even with the same force. She had accepted this journey as a something which must be done. Her mother had said so; and in spite of the fact that she was considered rather a harum-scarum sort of a girl, Nellie Neville had always been accustomed to bow without question to her decision in regard to such matters.

Deliberately she turned the matter over in her mind.

"For years she has had such an antipathy to anything connected with the West, that I might have suspected something of the kind. In fact, I believe I did, only it was not half hard enough. What could she expect to find here that would repay her for all the fatigue and discomfort she is undergoing?"

"Certainly, it can be no mere question of money. Unless all reports are strangely wrong she was singularly fortunate in gathering in the little all of the effects left by my father—my poor father, whom I never saw. At this late hour what could induce her to visit the scene of the tragedy? But, pshaw! What am I thinking of! That occurred hundreds of miles from here. The West is a large place."

Nellie was just opening up a field of thought in which she had hitherto feared to wander. How far she would have gone it is hard to say. The sudden stoppage of the coach caused her to bump back against the front panels with a thump that made her head ring.

Then she heard a hoarse voice:

"That's right, Johnny. Hold her right thar an' yer won't git hurt. Keep them ban's well up, an' yer foot on ther brake beam, while we take a look at what you have inside!"

"Goshalmitey! How kin—Don't shute!" exclaimed the driver, a sudden change in his tones, as he thought he detected a suspicious movement of a finger of the masked man who stood in the center of the road, a carbine at his shoulder.

"Ef you sling lead ter-day you'll hev a bigger lot ter pitch to-morrer. Who's goin' ter pull in ef he finds it's goin' ter be a wooden overcoat anyhow?"

At the very first glimpse of the man in the mask Johnny had taken a steady pull, his hands at the same time rising above the level of his head, while his right foot kicked over the brake. He was too old a hand at the ribbons not to understand the meaning of the apparition.

"Kayrect, Johnny! Do yer hull duty an' you'll come out jaybird, every time. But, on jin'ral principles it won't hurt ter let a man know what ther chances are ef he begins ter monkey with ther buzz-saw. What yer got inside?"

"Only two bits ov female women, an' ef yer'll b'lieve me I don't jest think they're any too well heeled. I'm afearid this're goin' ter be a water-haul; but yer can't keno every time."

"Button up, Johnny. It's facts I war after, an' not idears. Ther boys kin find out fur themselves, an' anyway it's not your loss."

Probably there was a reason why the conversation should be prolonged. Miss Nellie heard every word of it, and her mother, who had been awakened by the halt, caught the greater part. They said nothing, but were inwardly quaking as they listened, wondering what would be the result, and whether the assurance of the stage-driver would by any possibility result in their being allowed to pass on without any further hindrance. It was quite a surprise when they heard another voice, right at the door of the coach:

"Excuse me, ladies, if you are alone and unprotected; but on general principles I never allow myself to be deceived by a statement until I have made an attempt to verify the truth or falsity of the same. Resistance will be absurdly useless. Please to step down and out while I investigate."

"It is perfectly useless to waste the time," answered Mrs. Neville, coldly.

"I assure you there is no one else here. We are the sole occupants, and as the driver has informed you, we are none too well provided with this world's goods. What we have shall be placed at your disposal, and I hope we shall be allowed to then proceed without further delay. It will be almost dark before we get to our journey's end!"

"Probably," answered the chief, dryly.

At the same time he dropped into his pocket the purse the lady handed him.

"You are not very complimentary to my judgment when you hint I would be guilty of stopping the hearse for such a stake as that. A lady such as you appear to be would hardly

be traveling without resources in available shape, and more commensurate with her style."

"I assure you, sir, that you are mistaken."

"Sorry to hear it, madam, for right or wrong I never allowed myself to be moved from a position I have once taken; and I have decided I am to have at least ten thousand dollars out of this outfit."

CHAPTER II.

FOR RANSOM.

"TEN thousand dollars! You must be wild."

Very calmly did Mrs. Neville answer, though the announcement she had just heard was enough to take away the breath of the average woman.

"That is about the figure. A few dollars more or less will of course make no great difference; but practically it must be that sum. And very cheaply am I letting you off."

"But, sir, every cent I have in the world would not reach that amount. There was a time when it might have been raised; but of late years I have had reverses."

"You have friends. In such cases they will do more for you than if you were starving."

He did not explain what he meant by "such cases," but it was not hard to guess.

"Ten thousand dollars! No, you cannot mean it, or else you are crazy."

"Not so crazy as you think. You underrate your own resources. At least, I hope so. Come, now. Can you draw me a check for the amount? I should certainly prefer to have you do so, as it would be so simple, save so much trouble."

"Have done with that nonsense! I have told you the truth. Why, you already have all my available funds in your pocket; and it had seemed all along such a pitiful sum to carry out the duties I have to perform. Waste no more time with us if you are wise. There is but one thing to do. Let us go on our way, and the next time see that you strike a richer quarry."

"Excuse me if I refuse to be convinced. I believe I requested you to alight. Please do not compel me to change the invitation into a command. I desire to be presented to your daughter, and you are holding me at a disadvantage."

The man in the mask had already opened the door, and had been standing in an attitude respectful enough while he listened to Mrs. Neville.

He stepped back, now, and waved his neatly gloved hand toward the turf at the side of the road.

Were it not for the mask, and the things he had said, the lady could have supposed him an officer in the army. He was dressed in a suit that seemed at first glance to be a uniform, and on his shoulders were worked a pair of gold leaves. There was an irritating rasp in the tone of his voice; but his actions were those of a man accustomed to good society.

"You—you certainly cannot mean it," said the lady, hesitatingly.

Her courage, so far, had been superb, but that was because hopes of a speedy termination to the interview had upheld her. She began to see there was an earnestness about the outlaw which might prove deadly.

"Every word of it, madam," was his cool answer.

"I wish to be as courteous as possible, but you must see I cannot afford to waste time. Dismount before I am compelled to seem harsh."

Mrs. Neville was frightened, yet she did not hesitate. She sprang lightly down through the opened door, and was immediately followed by Miss Nellie, who up to this moment had remained discreetly silent.

"Talk of the chivalry of the knights of the road," hissed the young lady through her teeth.

"You are worse than the ordinary sand-clubber. If I had my way I would just shoot you down and stand the chances."

As she spoke she held up a pistol—not with a flourish, at all, but with a gesture which meant, "I have it, and I know how to use it. Look out that I do not open fire."

"Ah, I see you have not neglected the counsel, 'In peace prepare for war.' Nevertheless, I am not afraid a girl of your sterling good sense could be such an utter fool as to start a brawl where nothing but harm could come to herself. For a moment, as you are."

Then, without a second glance at the revolver Miss Nellie was still holding, with the muzzle trained on him in a dangerously accurate aim, the outlaw turned to the driver.

"Now, Johnny, I have never found you a fool on the occasion of our previous interviews, and I don't expect to find you one now. Drive on, at once, and if you ever look around I will send a bullet after you that will be apt to take you plumb in the face."

Johnny needed no second request, or warning.

He brought his whip down along the backs of his horses, at the same time throwing back the brake. The animals sprang forward, the wheels went round, and in a breath of time, as it were, the vehicle had vanished from view.

At that Nellie gave a little cry of dismay, and her face did actually grow pale for an instant. The two women were left alone to the tender mercies of the outlaws, and the situation seemed to be painfully distressing. If it had not been for a glimpse she had of three or four motionless figures in the background it is possible Nellie would have been so moved to desperation that she would have tried a snapshot at the outlaw.

But each one of those lurkers held a Winchester, the muzzle of which was turned in her direction, and the young lady was not yet ready to greet what to her seemed certain death.

The elder lady retained her calmness, though the effort required was terrible, if unseen.

"This outrage is worse than the first. Perhaps it would have been better to have fought from the start to finish, even if the end was but to go down with flying colors."

"Nonsense, madam! A great many men have tried their hands on me, and I am here yet, in spite of the funerals. And though I am always willing to run the risks of a shot, yet I am sure I will not fall unavenged. The boys in the background would give a strong account of themselves if anything happened to me."

Without further notice of the weapon he had seen in Nellie's hand he turned carelessly toward his men, and made a slight gesture, which was evidently understood.

Several outlaws, masked like their leader, came forward, leading horses.

And to the terror of Mrs. Neville she saw that two of the animals wore side-saddles. This was no chance affair. There was a deeper scheme than she had dreamed of.

"Pardon me if I speak firmly. I wish to treat you with all due respect, but you must understand from the start that what I say goes. It is unpleasant to have to order a lady when a suggestion ought to do as well; but it would be much more so to be compelled to proceed to extremities. Make up your minds, now and forever, that what I say is final, in all cases, and without escape. Mount, if you please."

With another of his military bows the man stepped toward Mrs. Neville. His movements showed that he intended to assist her.

Both the ladies were finished equestrians. The back of even a strange steed had no terrors for them. And probably the same thought darted through the mind of each. Once on horseback and there might be a better opportunity for escape.

Certainly, it was without the assistance of the outlaw that the two floated into their saddles, and sought to gather up the reins.

Their movements were quick, but they took no one by surprise. Almost as soon the outlaw leader was in his seat, his men beside or near him, and the whole gang so grouped around the ladies that anything like a successful dash was impossible.

"For the present it is as well that the conversation stop. There will be plenty of time in which to renew it. I hope you understand you are to be our guests until this little financial matter is settled."

"Your—your guests!" exclaimed Mrs. Neville, with a choking gasp at the end.

"Yes. There is nothing so terrible about it. The accommodations are not strictly first-class, I must admit; but a poor person, such as you are trying to represent yourself to be, might go further and fare worse."

It took the very highest kind of courage to sustain the two under the shock, even though they had been somewhat prepared to meet it. They made no answer, however; and without waiting for one the chief gave the signal, and the cavalcade moved off.

On a plain road, and under ordinary circumstances Mrs. Neville might have retained some sense of direction; but before they had gone far she was utterly at a loss to know whence they had come, and whither they were going.

There was no beaten trail to be followed, and their course lay up and down hill, through valleys and under the shadow of what seemed to be a forest. They knew little about it, except that the ride was a long one, and that when the final halt came they were woefully tired.

"Although it is not our custom when at home, yet for the present it may be as well for us to remain *en masque*. Allow me to introduce you to Mira. She will look after your comfort, and if you are wise you will take her into your confidence. She cannot help you to escape, but she might make a valuable friend. For the present, allow me to wish you a very good-evening."

"Bless my soul! You are masked, too," exclaimed Nellie, as her eyes fell upon the person pointed out as Mira.

"I begin to think it might be as well if we were to do something of the kind ourselves. I can't promise yet that I will like you, but I know I will be wonderfully grateful if you can furnish us some supper. We are in the last stages of starvation."

She nodded gayly as she spoke. Of course, it was all pretense, but she could see nothing to be gained by sulking or crying; and there might be profit in appearing to take things as she found them. If Mira chose it was not so certain she could not assist them; and it would hurt nothing to try and gain her confidence.

And Mira, in spite of the fact that her face was invisible, looked as though she might be a handsome and a young woman. She had the neatest of figures, and the most graceful of walks, while her voice was very soft and sweet.

"If madame and her daughter will but wait a moment or two, their supper will be before them. It has already been prepared. For the little time I hope they will remain here, it will be better for them to feel themselves at home. Only, do not think of going out until the general opens the doors. Any attempt at escape will only make it the worse for you. While here I can assure you you will be safe; but beyond the limit of the camp I have no power."

"And how long, pray, must I expect to remain here?" asked Mrs. Neville.

"Until the ransom the general has demanded of you shall have been paid."

"Forever, then?" with a shrug of the shoulders.

"I hope not," said Mira, slowly.

"There are worse places than this, but you ought not to remain here, either. If you are temporarily without funds, your only hope is to borrow. You can do that, I am sure. The general has said so, and he makes no mistakes."

"And you think that on such slight notice, in a land of strangers, I can borrow ten thousand dollars?"

"I know it."

CHAPTER III.

THE WAYS TO WELCOME A GUEST.

ONLY a man who was thoroughly accustomed to sizing up his fellow-men would have guessed within twenty-five pounds of the weight of Tom Reid, the Sport of Silver Bend, at the first time of meeting.

That came, probably, from his being so thoroughly proportioned, as much as from the lightness of both step and manner. A man with a bright smile and a springy step can carry off an extra quarter of bone and muscle that will not be discovered till they come into play.

He was a good horseman, too, so that the raw-boned mustang which owned him for a master carried his weight with less fatigue than he would have done many a lighter man. The two came swinging along the road which led to Silver Bend without a sign of weariness, though they had covered a good sixty miles since leaving their last stopping-place—making an allowance, of course, for the temporary rest at noon.

"Tough lines on you, old fellow," laughed the Sport, as he bent slightly forward to pat the mustang on the neck.

"For a whole fortnight in clover—speaking after the manner of men who do not know the true article from a mesquite branch. And then, a pelt like this, with more to follow. Never mind. If Silver Bend has such a thing as a horse palace, you shall have the best apartment, and in a day or two more you shall rest to your soul's satisfaction."

The mustang was not the kind of an animal found in the books. It uttered no sound, neither did it toss up its head in recognition of the kindly words; but continued to lope steadily along. There was plenty of go in it yet, but it was sufficiently tired to care little for sentiment, and was a matter-of-fact sort of animal after all.

"As usual, nothing to say," Reid suggested.

"It comes natural to talk to you, old fellow; but, I swear, I have doubts if you like me a bit better for it. You take a deal of petting because you have the cheek to think it is yours by right; but you stand up to your work because it is business. I know some people who are a good bit after the same order. Ah!"

Behind him he could hear the tearing gallop of a horse.

"Seems to be in a hurry," he thought, noting how rapidly he was being overhauled.

"Steady, now! If he wants to go by let him go. There is no sense in showing a single, solitary, extra pace unless there is coin in the exhibition. No telling what we may have to do to turn an honest penny."

The mustang had cast its ears backward at the sound, but otherwise displayed no nervousness, nor did it either lengthen or quicken its stride as the strange horse and rider flitted by.

Tom Reid glanced carelessly after the two, but fully took in the points of both.

As most important, the horse came first.

"A rare good one, old fellow," he muttered; "and yet I think you could give him a rod at any reasonable distance, and come with your nose first to the string. Gentleman riders up, of course, though I am not sure there would be so much advantage for you in that. He looks as though he could get out all there was in man or beast. Quite a military looking man, to be sure; and no doubt one of the kings of Silver Bend. Wonder what he has been doing over this way."

The mustang went pounding along at the same steady lope, without giving a bit of attention to what was being said to him, yet, either by chance, or on account of the wonderful horse sense with which his owner credited him, he gave a nod of the head a moment later, which

might mean affirmation—for Reid had thoughtfully continued:

"A hard man to deal with, he looks; and something tells me I have not seen the last of him. Yet—I believe I am able for him."

After that he thought of something else. The town was not far distant unless he was greatly mistaken, and his appetite was having a word or two to say in regard to the near future.

A movement of the mustang caused him to look up from what was almost a reverie.

The animal did not change its stride, nor did it throw up its head as it would naturally have done had it been alarmed; yet there was a single little thrill, felt by the rider, and a slight raising of the muzzle the better to scent something in the distance.

"There you are again, old man. Thanks for the notice. Eyes are open—though it can hardly be anything dangerous, unless it is our friend, the military man, turning again for a little stroke of business on the snaffle lay. If so, he will find us ready."

There could hardly be a better place for an ambushade, if the lay of the land just beyond continued to improve after the fashion Reid suspected.

Unless he turned about and retraced his steps for nearly a quarter of a mile it was almost impossible to move to either flank, and from the crest of the bank that now lined the trail it would be the easiest thing in the world to pick him off before he could locate the assailant.

This was what Reid saw in an instant, though it must be understood he was not at all dismayed. If there was danger there—and so far it could be only the merest suspicion—he was not the kind of a man to shrink from it. In something of a venturesome life he had found shrinking did not pay.

But as long as it did not confuse the nerves there was nothing like being prepared for the unexpected.

And so it happened that as he flashed around the bend immediately in front of him he was not at all surprised to see a figure, which seemed somewhat familiar.

"The blamed idiot!" muttered the Sport.

"He is going to take the trick from horseback. Oh, my, what style!"

A little strange, was it, that he should be so certain of what was coming; but then he had experience by the bushel to fall back on, and instinct went a great way with him. So it happened that as the stranger in the path cried "halt!" and threw up his armed hands, Tom Reid clapped spurs to his mustang, swung himself sideways in the saddle until his shoulder was scarcely higher than his hip, and before the road-agent had time to alter his aim had him by the ankle.

"Next time don't take your stand quite so near the turn," he laughed, at the same time giving a dexterous twist and heave as he shot by.

Looking back over his shoulder, or rather around it, since he still crouched low in the saddle, he had the satisfaction of seeing the highwayman motionless on the ground. He had fallen squarely on his head.

So rapidly had this passed that Reid had not had more than a glimpse of his assailant, and it was too late now to make out more about his figure without a halt, and a more leisurely examination than he cared to give.

All he noted was that the horse seemed familiar, that the man was apparently about the same height and build as the one who had passed him but a short time before, and that a cloak and mask were sufficient disguise to prevent an absolute recognition at any future time.

"Ping!"

A bullet went by his ear so closely he thought it had grazed him.

"Not so lone a highwayman, after all," was the mental comment.

"Pards lying back to see the trick done, and chip in if they have to. Let 'em chip. If they don't hit Dandy inside of twenty rods they won't do it at all; and I am willing to run my own risks."

Reid was just as cool as if he was just riding for exercise, and there was not a spectator within half a mile. He let his glance run backward once more, taking in the crumpled figure in the road, which was beginning to show signs of remaining life, and a couple of masked ruffians on the bank above him, who were trying to take a careful aim. He was a little surprised when they dropped their weapons without another shot, and scrambled down to the side of their leader.

"He has called off his dogs, has he? Good enough! By the time they have repaired damages I will be far enough out of the way to make the stern chase a long one if they try it on. In fact, tired as Dandy is, I would be willing to race them in to Silver Bend for a thousand, and charge nothing for the corpses along the road. Thunder! I ought to go back and drop some one. I must be in a doubly amiable humor this evening or I never would have passed that last shot."

Having had time to think the matter over Reid was beginning to reel indignant.

The attack had been a failure, and he had

come out with flying colors, bar the fact that he was now running away. And what made him angry was the useless shot. It seemed to him the men in reserve could have no sense of humor at all.

Nevertheless, though he slackened his speed somewhat, he kept on, once or twice mechanically feeling of his weapons, but never actually offering to draw them.

"It must have been my friend, the military-looking man; and yet, I hardly thought he was that sort of a person. Of course, I knew I would see him again, but I didn't expect him to come back at me in just that sort of shape. The next time we meet I guess it will be I holding the drop, and if he can turn the tables as neatly I'll forgive him for the effort."

Then, he laughed to himself at the idea of meeting the outlaws again. It was not at all likely a professional road-agent would take the trouble to follow after a man who had given such convincing proofs he could take care of his purse; and of course he would steer clear of Silver Bend after such a failure.

"Don't know, though. Some of these fellows have the nerve of the Old Boy, and I will be a stranger in the town. Ware hawk, Thomas; keep quiet about your adventure, and if you do meet again guard your own head. You can bet your sweet life there is no one in the town that will do it for you."

"And, speaking of towns, there she is now."

After that it took but a few minutes to reach the principal street of the Bend, and knowing what he was looking for he soon drew up in front of a hotel which looked as though it might be the best one in the place.

As he slid down from his mustang Reid saw a man come out through the open door, and recognized him on the instant. It was the military-looking individual who had overtaken him shortly before the attack by the road-agents.

"Hello!" he thought.

"Wonder if this man lives about here. Don't seem as though he could be the fellow I canted off into the road, unless there is some kind of a short cut. I must keep an eye on him, and see how long ago he got into town."

"Hyer ye are, Kunnell!" squeaked a voice at his elbow.

"I'm the boy ez takes keer ov ther cayuses, an' ther boss'll be out in a minnit. They're a-bringin' him to, now. Maje Burton are on a b'uster, an' tipped him one frum ther shoulder, but he didn't mean it fur keeps. A bully good feller are maje, an' he'll make it all right with ther boss in ther mornin'. Jest walk right in an' make yerself at home ef they don't j'ine yer soon."

CHAPTER IV.

MUSIC—OF MORE KINDS THAN ONE.

"THANKS for the advice, bub, though it's no great good. I always calculate on making myself at home, anyhow. Take good care of Dandy, and when I get the alkali washed off a little I'll come out and see if you know how the thing ought to be done."

He was turning away to enter the house when a thought struck him.

"By the way, my boy, who is Major Burton? The name sounds familiar, but I don't remember to have met the gentleman."

"Yander he goes—jest ther jim-dandiest sport as ever flipped a keard, er held a shootin'-iron. Life's too short fur ter tell you all his p'int; and it wouldn't be fair ter leave any ov 'em out. Ef you wants ter know 'em you ask him fur his history, but I'm bizzzy now. This boss wants ter go ter ther stable."

After all, it was as much information as he expected to receive, and so Reid did not think it worth the while to feel indignant at the cavalier manner in which he was treated by the Lilliputian.

"That ought to settle it; but I am not so sure it does. I'll certainly have to make some inquiries, though if he has had time to get up a racket with the boss it can hardly be my man. They seem to take such things mighty coolly here."

If he had not been pretty thoroughly broken in to the improbable, Tom Reid might have doubted the veracity of the boy.

Half a dozen men were sitting around, certainly within hearing distance of an affray; but their conversation was going on in a listless manner, and no one even turned a curious eye after the military figure, still to be seen, stalking away, in the distance.

They looked up carelessly as the sport strode just past them—one actually went so far as to give a short nod. Evidently, none of them had an interest in the hotel.

Striding past them Reid entered the house, and finding the first room empty went on through an open door.

In the room beyond he found "the boss," and the corroboration of the story of the lad outside. There was a man on the floor, and several other men were helping him to rise.

"There you are, Sammy," said one of these men, easing him down again into an arm-chair, to which they had assisted him.

"Do you have these spells often? Thought you were a goner when I saw you coiled up on the floor."

"Spells, nothin', dog-blast yer! It war jest a straight one from the shoulder out, thet laid me stupid. Whar are he?"

"Where is who?"

"Don't you tell me you didn't see him. I hed jest tetcht ther floor when you come in, an' he must 'a' brushed past yer. This time it's wunst too often. Git me my gun, ther double-barrel, with a handful of buckshot in each side. I'm goin' huntin' now, fur sure."

"Oh, see here, Ward, you have just been dreaming again. There was no one here, and I reckoned when I came in that you had taken a notion to go to sleep on the floor. It's your house, and if you want to do a thing of the kind I would like to know whose business it is, anyhow?"

"It won't work this time, Jimmy, it won't work."

"What do you mean?"

"Thet you're a-layin in with ther major. He knowed he'd gone too fur, an' sent you in ter smooth it off; but this time I'm a-goin' fur ter git even, an' I d'unno but what I mout ez well begin with you."

He turned a little savagely toward the man who had accused him of falling asleep on the floor, and his hand dropped toward his hip, as though in search of a weapon.

"Don't shoot, Sammy, don't shoot!" exclaimed the man, in what Reid could not fail to see was mock terror.

"You must have been rubbing it in heavy if the major forgot himself far enough to hit you. Go for him, if you want to, but for heaven's sake let us out. We are your solid friends, and you ought to know it."

"So's the major, but what good is that goin' ter do ef he knocks me down?"

"That's so, my friend," interrupted Tom, who was beginning to think it time to make his presence known; "but, business comes first, and I would like to know what that all has to do with my chances for supper."

"Not a thing, not a blamed, blasted thing," eagerly responded the landlord, apparently for the first time aware of the presence of a stranger.

"Ther Giraffe are runnin' on wheels, an' ready fur all comers ov ther sect masculine. Ef yer' a single man, yer' welcome with all yer fambly; but right thar I draws ther line. Ther weaker vessel are a delusion an' a fraud, an' ez fur ez I know, they can't stop hyer."

"Just what I like to hear, myself," replied the Sport, with a heartiness not altogether assumed.

"Bad medicine they are and always have been. It's not worth while wasting time talking the matter over. Let's have some supper."

Sammy Ward was evidently a bit of a crank; but under his schedule limitations, had a keen eye to business.

He rose after the style of a renovated man, and bustled away, with Tom in his charge, without even a good-by to his friends, who laughed, and retired in good order.

They might laugh at his peculiarities; but they would not interfere in a matter of dollars and cents.

When, a little later, Reid seated himself at a table fairly well stocked with the substantial of the season, the landlord hovered around, anxious to know that everything was satisfactory.

"And what was the matter between you and the major?" asked Reid, during a slight interval when his mouth was not more than half full.

"Jest ther same old story. I said I war runnin' ther house ter suit myself; an' he said I war a blamed ole igeot. I raised my flukes, an' he hit out. It war short an' sweet. Next thing I see'd war Jimmy an' his pard a-bendin' over me."

"Must have had quite an argument to bring you both up to such a fever-pitch. About how long does it take to get you both fighting mad?"

"Not more ner a minnit. It jest hed to be so, an' that's all thar is to it."

It did not look as though there was much chance for definite information here, and Tom dropped the subject.

"Handy Sim took yer boss," began the landlord, after a few moments of well-improved silence.

"Handy took the horse; and if Handy don't take proper care of him the horse will look after himself and Handy too. Don't trouble yourself about the animal; though, if you think there is a chance of a call for it you might say a prayer or two for Handy."

"Ef that's ther kind yer cayuse are ther two'll git along all right tergether. Goin' ter stay erwhile?"

"Till to-morrow morning only, unless the neighbors make arrangements for a planting. I have heard of Silver Bend, and am sorry I won't have time to take it all in. Still, a good deal can be done in an evening if you put a weight on the safety, and get the steam up."

"Sport, eh? One night'll be long ernuf, onless yer stays a month. You sink ther 'riginal

capital here ther f'ust twenty-four hours, git wisdom an' understandin', an' then, ef you kin git a month's wages, swingin' a pick in ther Lively Jane bonanza, er somewhar else, thar may be a chance ter go in an' win, ef you bin a-keepin yer eyes open ov nights, an' git on ter ther style ov ther gamboliers. Oh, Silver Bend are a great place, an' Major Burton are one ov its prophets."

"Thanks, awfully, old man! That was just what I wanted to know. And the headquarters of the animiles—the very deepest lair of the tiger—the place where all the sequins change hands—where is that?"

"Johnny Vincent's are ther place you'll be lookin' fur. Right 'round ther corner. Go thar an' be happy."

"Thanks. I believe I will."

Between the time spent in resting, and in eating, an hour or more had elapsed since Reid found his way into the Giraffe, and the shades of night had settled down upon the town. It was a little early to stray out upon the war-path; but there was nothing else to do.

Then he remembered Dandy, and getting directions went out to find him.

Sim had done his whole duty after an unexpected fashion. Dandy had been rubbed down while he was nibbling at his roughness, had been watered, and now was enjoying a bountiful feed of barley. The work of the day had not interfered with his appetite.

"Good boy! Here's a dollar for you. Keep it up and you won't fare the worse for it."

"All right, boss. Thought you were the kinder know when a boss war treated white, an' ter pay fur it 'cordin'. An' I don't like yer any ther wuss because I've found out I wa'n't mistaken. Ef I kin be ov ary help to yer, count me in. An' Handy Sim knows a heap about Silver Bend. He's little but he's wise."

"I don't doubt it. I have met young gentlemen of your caliber before, and was never above catching a wrinkle from them. If you had time to give me a few passages from the life of the gallant major I might listen to them; but as you haven't, I suppose the best plan will be to go out and see for myself."

"One on me, boss; but you see I hadn't sized up the bigness of your dollars. Tip me a few questions ag'in, an' see ef I don't give you ther wuth ov yer money, an' ther right change back."

"Oh, I haven't got much on my mind at present. I know the road to Johnny Vincent's, and the rest I ought to work out for myself. It might be worth something to know if Burton kicks when he loses, and just how hard."

"Like a Texas steer, boss, ef he thinks it wasn't all on ther square. An' when he gits on ther trail ov a bad man, he always brings him down. But treat him white, don't tramp on his toes, an' give him his own way a leetle when he seems like takin' ov it, an' he's as good a pard as yer wants ter see."

"Square, is he? Eh?"

"Square ez a die."

"Thanks. If Dandy gives a good report of you in the morning, I'll have another cartwheel for you. So long."

"Some sort of a mistake somewhere," he thought as he moved off. "Maybe he will take me for one of the bad men, though, and camp on my trail. It's hardly the thing to be brought down for the sake of one night's fling around a place like this—and I can't afford more. I must be at Coyote Run by the fifteenth. Perhaps I had better go to bed."

Nevertheless, he did not go to bed; but passed on down the street in the direction of Johnny Vincent's.

Half-way there he halted and looked straight in through an open window.

"The irony of fate," he muttered.

"Sixty miles in the saddle, and then an invitation to the dance. If I had it to do over again, I think I would make the trip in sections. Is it worth while to go in?"

The music was just striking up, there was a march of dancers to the center of the floor, the night was young, and there was plenty of time for Johnny Vincent's later on. With only a momentary hesitation he stepped up to the door just in time to catch a man, who reeled into his arms, as a pistol report echoed out into the street.

CHAPTER V.

PATENT PETE, THE PRACTICAL PLUMBER.

"JUST my luck—in time for a funeral!" was the cheerful ejaculation of the Sport, as his arms closed around the body which had been propelled against him with some force.

"Always my luck—and I suppose I will have so add a couple corpses to the record."

His left hand continued to support the stranger, but his right hand went back in the direction of his pistol-pocket, while he looked eagerly into the room.

"Don't jump too soon," came from the man on his arm, and then the individual squirmed away a step, but taking Tom with him as he did so.

"Thanks, stranger, but don't waste time here. It's all a joke, but thar are no telling how soon

it will be dead earnest. The Happy Home is not exactly according to your gait, and you better come along tell we kin strike somethin' better."

"All right, pard. You know the town and I don't. If that's your say-so, I'll go for a bit. I'm not actually weeping for fun to-night. But I don't want to be shot in the back, either."

Reid allowed himself to be drawn away, while he was speaking, but at the same time kept a wary eye on the doorway, from which he expected to see the shooter emerge.

"Oh, Jimmy will be only too glad ter let ther matter drap right thar. He was a leetle full when he swore he'd shoot at me on sight, an' then war fool enough ter think he hed ter keep his word. I give him his chance, an' now ther thing are settled. Ef he tries it on ag'in, that'll be a diff'rent matter, an' ov course I'll have ter down him."

"Mighty kind in you, pard, but aren't you afraid your reputation will suffer when they see you take a back seat so sudden? They may think you were actually running away."

"Don't you be afeared on that, though it's thoughtful in you, lookin' after ther repetashun ov a perfect stranger. They all know me hyer, an', in fact, they'd think I war gettin' purty low down ef I put Ten-cent Jimmy on my record. He's got the best intershuns in ther world, but he's innercent—blamed innercent."

The stranger chuckled as he spoke, as though he found a good deal of amusement in the late affair; but as Reid was profoundly ignorant of the particulars he could not follow the joke as closely as he would have wished.

"Guess you don't quite understand. He didn't get within a mile of me—leastwise, not within a foot. an' he thinks he brought me down, an' are afraid ter come out after the scalp ez I may be 'live long enough fur one last kick afore I go over ther range. There he is now; an' too glad ter see I'm still able to wabble away."

Tom looked back over his shoulder and saw a man standing in the doorway he had lately left, a revolver at a ready, peering anxiously down the street.

"He'll go back, now, feeling good all over, an' set up the drinks for the house, get blind drunk if his boss will let him, an' to-morrow morning won't know a blamed thing about it. There's nothin' like makin' a feller-mortal happy ef you kin do it without too much expense."

A curious sort of a man was this stranger, yet, from the little he had seen of his manner, Reid was inclined to like him.

As near as he could make out the stranger was a man of forty-five or fifty, well-built, and fairly well-dressed. Seen by the light from the saloon windows his face was not a bad one, and he was certainly as cool as man could be who had just been shot at.

"All right then, if you think all creation won't be practicing at you, long range and short, just because they think it's a safe amusement?"

There was little that was cold-blooded about Tom Reid, but he knew well enough how such things were apt to work, and his warning was kindly meant, and so understood.

"Thanks stranger, I understand; but I guess you don't know me. I'm Patent Pete, the Practical Plumber, an' a privileged party. Fact are, I can't afford ter take serious ther ddoes ov a man like Ten-cent Jimmy, an' I'm not goin' to. Ef you don't b'lieve me inquire at ther post-office. An', by ther way, I had o'rt ter thank yer fur savin' me what might 'a' bin a ugly fall. I misjudged ther height ov ther step; an' ef he'd only knowed it Jimmy might 'a' got me arter all."

"No thanks are needed. My name is Reid, Tom Reid, and as you must know, I am a stranger to the town. I am only laying off here for the night because I cannot go further, and am not hungry for amusement, either. But I thought I must see something of the place, so was steering for Vincent's when the music caught me. We may as well go there together."

"All right, if you're not afeared to lose yer repytashun bein' seen with Patent Pete. Honor bright, you might have a wu's man at yer back, though Johnny's are a place whar a stranger are middlin' safe."

"And how about his pocketbook?"

"That 'pends. Ef you don't bet you can't win."

"And won't be so likely to lose. It's a cold evening in town when I do neither, so, I must take my chances. Here we are, anyway."

The two men swung into the saloon together, and as a first move meandered toward the bar. As a general thing there is no better reflex of public opinion than a bartender at a popular saloon.

He may be high and mighty; he may not have a friendly word for Solomon himself; but his manner as between two men will show in what estimation they are held by the world at large.

Patent Pete stood the test at the bar. After noting the one glance at his companion, Tom Reid was satisfied he was not making much of a

mistake in training with the stranger, and was willing to regulate himself accordingly.

He acknowledged the introduction given him to several of the Silver Bend sports, and after a little conversation, of an uninteresting nature, drifted away toward the tables.

Reid had no idea of making a fortune. He did not even think of going very deeply into a game. As he had explained to Patent Pete, he only stopped over night in Silver Bend because he had to; and as he had sufficient means on hand to take him forward, and his journey was one of business, all he thought of was amusement of some kind or other, that should not be too serious, until the average hour for bedtime had arrived.

But a man who is accustomed to handling the pasteboards or fighting the tiger as his profession can hardly resist the temptation to using them as a means of recreation. It was just as natural to find a game as it was to look for his meals.

He was in the best of humors as he neared the table around which was clustered a knot of bettors and spectators, but he halted suddenly, a few steps away, and looked earnestly at the dealer, while his lips puckered up into something like an effort at a whistle.

"How is this, pard?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I thought a chap by the name of Johnny Vincent ran the shebang; but that is sure and certain a lady who is seated behind the green cloth."

Patent Pete laughed.

"Ha, ha! Thought you would open your eyes when you got a glimps' ov her, but I didn't know you'd hit it jest so straight. A lady she are, an' don't you furgit it. An' ther man who sez otherwise might jest hev ter mount the hull Bend."

"But it is not Mrs. Vincent, is it?"

"Nary! Her husband are a man by ther name ov Harry Melrose; but they gen'rally speaks ov her ez Merry May, that bein' ther name she used ter flourish onder afore ther splicin'."

"Has he skipped the country that he allows his wife behind the table in a public saloon?"

Reid spoke a little sternly. He had his reasons for it, which he did not care then to explain.

"You're wrong, pard," Patent Pete earnestly answered.

"An' you better not hint that way to ther leetle woman. Harry are ez squar' ez they make 'em, but he had a hard run ov luck, an' when he war clean dead broke, got a stray bit ov lead betwixt his shoulders. That war six months ago; an', pard, they hed ter live. She couldn't leave him flat on his back, not sure ef he would ever git up ag'in, an' she couldn't make a livin' at short keyards in this burg, whar they know ther strength ov her hand, an' ther good luck thet are mostly behind it. Then Johnny gave her a show; an' a good thing it are all 'round. Biz hez bin lively since she took ther box."

"I suspect it has. I don't think she would stay if it was not."

Reid spoke thoughtfully, and the tone more than the words told that the lady under question was not altogether a stranger.

"Reckon you've seen her afore? Lots ov folks hez, an' I don't recomember that ary one ever spoke anything but good ov her."

"Correct you are. She is a good little woman from the word go, though I never had anything to say to her except what I had to remark over the table, and when we got done there was nothing to kick about, for it was a square game. If she won it was luck and good playing on her side. I doubt if she would remember me now."

"She'll know your face ef she ever saw it, ef she does furgit yer name. If you mean sport, git yer chips an' sail in."

Tom shook his head but said nothing. He edged up a little closer to the table, looking over the shoulders of the men in the front rank.

Of course he was noticed by more than one man; but it was only in a casual way, and as a stranger. If he had pushed a little further forward he would have attracted more attention.

In the course of five minutes Patent Pete had wandered away, and no one else in the house seemed to be aware of his presence.

What interested Reid in the game as much as anything was the fact that in a chair in front of the center of the table sat Major Burton.

He had a good opportunity to inspect the man who he had begun to fancy was destined to interfere more or less seriously in his own affairs; and though he was a pretty good physiognomist he was more or less puzzled with what he saw.

The face was a good one, though somewhat marked by lines which came from dissipation, or strong passions.

At times it had even a desperate look, though for the most part only a reckless one. What sort of a life had he been living that at his age he should have that look, and yet not have sunk lower down?

For the major was trimly dressed, in a sort of semi-military style, and was neatness itself, so far as personal appearance went. He even had a prosperous air marked in every curve of his figure, and bend of his neck.

"I may be mistaken," thought the sport,

"but he hardly looks as though he had the cares of a road-agent on his mind. He certainly saw me as I came up to the table, and he looked back over his shoulder, but the sight gave him no uneasiness. Wonder if it would be worth while to feel him a little? It might bring something to the surface."

Acting on the thought he invested a few dollars in chips, and waiting until the major had played the jack to win, deliberately coppered the long-heeled villain to lose.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TROUBLE ON THE TURN.

KNOWING the major had been drinking, and suspecting he might be the man he had lately tumbled off his horse into the road, the action of Reid was a fair start toward calling the major's hand, and if the scheme led up to an explosion it would be no great wonder.

Burton did seem to make a slight movement of the head, as though wishing to see who it was differing from him in judgment, but perhaps it was involuntary. His eyes came back to the lay-out so swiftly it was hard to tell they had ever left it, and with his arms resting on the edge of the table he watched his stake and the nimble fingers of Merry May as she drew card after card out of the box.

In due course of time the jack lost, and Reid was the winner of an amount he would scarcely have taken into consideration if he had been playing a serious game.

He drew it in, nevertheless, with a satisfied chuckle, and waited again for the major to deposit his checks.

Once more the major bet on the jack, and once more Reid played the same trifling amount on the card to lose.

The dealer looked up at the man who had lately come into the game. If she recognized him she gave no sign, but gravely drew the cards as before, though Tom could imagine her chuckling to herself at the idea of such a man playing a two-dollar game when he was renowned for wanting to stretch the limit as a preliminary to high gambling.

"The next time ought to bring it," Reid thought to himself, as he saw the jack oncemore coming out on the banker's side.

"Reckon Merry May won't say anything as long as the winnings are not too obvious. And if she feels like it, maybe I can give her a hint to keep dark till I can have a chance to explain."

Again the major made a bet, and this time he played the card to lose—and Reid as gravely backed it to win. He was pretty sure that no matter how the luck ran Burton would see he was opposing him as a settled plan. What might come after he could not guess, but wanted to find out.

There was one thing that had not occurred to the mind of the Sport, for it was unlikely to happen. While he was fishing for the major the possibility was he might catch some other fish.

And this was just what did occur.

With a low, rasping curse, a man looked up. "See hyer! You can't play that on me. I've dropped a good hundred in this house, last night and to-night, an' just when luck war comin' my way you had ter step in an' hoodoo it. I'm onto ther game, an' I won't have it. You hear me, stranger?"

There could be no mistake as to whom he meant, for his eyes were fixed directly upon Reid.

"I hear you, sure enough, if that is what you are driving after; but I don't see what you have to be kicking about. Talk to Mr. Vincent if you think you can draw out that two hundred deposit. It's not my affair."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no, to that. I seen sence you come inter ther game thet you win, an' this gent loses. If that keeps up I'll swear you're in with ther bank."

"Why, you blamed, idiotic old galeot! What has that got to do with you, I'd like to know?"

"A heap-sight, ez I figger it out. Ef ther bank turns ther luck your side ov ther house there's only one way ov doin' it thet I know ov. Ef three cards come out 'stead ov two, are it any wonder I don't win?"

The man moved back from the table as he spoke, and though the task was a hard one he seemed to be trying to watch both Tom Reid and the dealer at the same time. He had not produced a weapon, but his hand was suspiciously ready, and a turn of the fingers would almost place them on the revolver at his hip.

Merry May was listening to him with a look of cold unconcern on her face. Her thumb hung over the card she was about to draw, and she waited for the discussion between the two men to come to an end as though it had nothing to do with her.

"All right, pardner," answered Tom, without betraying the least anger. "If that is the view you take of it I don't wonder you want to speak your little piece before the thing goes any further. At the same time I can't help remarking, as I did once before, that you are a blamed idiot. Watch the cards, and when you see any-

thing crooked it will be time plenty to put in your say-so."

"I'm watchin' 'em, an' I give you both fair warnin'. Now, ef anything crooked comes out somebody'll go down, an' go down hard."

"That's a clever way to say it. If you are done -pouting suppose you let the deal go on."

"I'm not stoppin' it," replied the man, deceived, perhaps, by the way in which his charge had been met.

"Pull the cards, old lady; but pull 'em slow, and extry careful. I can't make a mss with a woman in ther cheer; but I got one ov the heelers spotted, an' it'll be thunderin' warm fur him if things don't come out straight."

Tom Reid had not the least doubt about the fairness of the game Merry May was playing, and so had not been watching it closely.

At the same time, she could not have sprung the cards, or taken any unfair advantage in the putting up of the deck. It was not certain whether the man really believed his charges—for such they were—or whether he was making them for the purpose of starting a disturbance.

Whichever it was, the time of the fellow to make his words good was not very far off—if Reid won again.

And the Sport had faith he would do so.

He had met with such streaks before, and would not have been surprised, or very doubtful, if some one had told him he was to win every stake he placed upon the cloth, so long as he did not alter his method, or raise the amount of his risks to any great extent.

"Not altogether a comfortable looking fellow to have a row with," he thought, as he saw the shapely little thumb settling itself again for business.

"And he means it, every word of it. Did the major tip him a wink, or is all this truck sober earnest? Burton looks very tired, but it won't hurt anything to see what he will be doing as the fellow tries to handle his revolvers. Somebody is after my scalp, and I'll know who it is before the night is over, or know the reason why."

And as he thought this—conscious all the time that he was away below par with the crowd on account of the way he had been letting this fellow bluff him—the end came. He had won again.

It was natural to suppose Tom would do one of two things.

Either he would be watching the grumbler to see what he was going to do under the circumstances, or he would be bending over the table to draw in the money he had won.

Instead of that he made a short step back, and gave a quick glance around. He was aware the crowd of spectators was larger than when he came to the table, and it struck him there was more in this game than appeared on the surface.

It was just as well that he did so.

He caught a glimpse of several rough-looking men pushing their way toward him. If it had not been for his quick movement they would have been upon him already. He just had time to send out a lightning-like blow at the nearest when the other struck fiercely at his head with a clubbed revolver.

It all came so suddenly the movements of the Sport were not half understood by those of the bystanders who were not in the game.

Reid's blow went home where it would do the most good, and the man upon whom it landed dropped to the floor, shoving several other men to this side and that.

But though the Sport dodged, as well as he was able, the stroke made at his head, it would have at least grazed him heavily had it not been for an unexpected bit of assistance.

"Not this time, pardy, but some other time. Patent Pete's around, an' got ther tools fur a good job ov plumbin'. How's that ter stop a leak?"

As he spoke Pete was giving a quick upward stroke with his clinched fist, which struck the wrist of the man slightly before his weapon could land on the head of the Sport.

The revolver went spinning into the air, the fellow gave a low cry of pain and dismay, but before he could turn upon his assailant the Practical Plumber had him in his gripe. The twist and heave he gave could not be resisted and he fell headlong, quivering but senseless on the spot where his head first touched the hard floor.

When Reid struck out, and then dodged, his hands dropped to his waist—and shot up again, each holding a revolver. It took a trifle of time, and if the fellow at the table had understood better the man with whom he had to deal he might have been holding the drop. But he lingered, expecting his pards to do the work, and lost his chance. Reid was a shade the soonest, after all.

"Steady, you," the Sport gritted, as his revolver covered the man who had made his threats, though he was not so sure the major was not the more dangerous of the two.

"It seems you do the say-so, and your heelers do the work. Or, at least, they try to. If you were a white man I wouldn't mind giving you an even start, but as it is I reckon it will be altogether the safest to keep on holding a

slight advantage. What sort of a gang is this you have behind you, anyhow?"

"What do yer mean, talkin' 'bout a gang? I run me own clam-wagon, an' toot me own horn. Ez fur them two on ther floor—I never see'd 'em afore, an' don't expect ter see 'em ag'in. Ef you broke the'r necks you kin settle with ther Bend; it ain't nothin' ter me."

"Let it go about that. I think I can settle matters with the Bend. What I have to say to you is something else. If you have any business with me you can mention to the court and jury the nature of the same, and proceed to its transaction. Now is your time, and if you don't finish it up while the lamp holds out to burn I'll give you fair notice I'll shoot you on sight the next time I catch you fooling around my section of the hemisphere."

"You think you own the whole earth, do you?" sneered the fellow, but at the same time glancing uneasily over his shoulder, where Patent Pete had been getting in his good work.

"Oh, no, not more than half of it. Pard Pete owns the balance, and seems able to run things in that direction."

Pete was able. There was no one in the room who did not know who he was, when he whipped out his pistols and put his back to that of Tom Reid, shouting:

"Stiddy all! Ef ye wants ter have a shy at my pard yer got ter wait tell he's done with ther fun in front. Ef yer can't, crawl over me, fu'st, an' ef I don't tickle yer so yer can't live I give yer leave ter la'ff tell I die."

And three or four men who were coming with what they meant, first off, should be a rush to make up for the time they had lost, knew him, and that he meant what he said, and suddenly halted.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGHT OF THE CHAMPIONS.

FOR the first time since the winning card had appeared for Tom Reid, Merry May spoke.

Everything had been said and done so rapidly she had not had a chance to size up the affair, and if she had wanted to be heard there would have been little chance for her unless she spoke through the medium of her seven-shooters.

"Gentlemen, you are interrupting the game," she said, firmly.

"If you have anything more to say you must go out doors to continue the conversation. There is too much coin lying around here loose to allow any such nonsense to go further. Put up your pistols, and either go on with the game, keep your remarks to yourself, or travel. I do not speak twice."

"And I warn you that every square man in the room, as well as myself, will back the lady in what she says. There has been no occasion for this disturbance in anything the dealer has done; and if there is any one here has a settlement to make with the stranger this is not the place for it. As long as he only protects himself I think he will find the majority of the men in the room are standing in with him."

Major Burton arose leisurely, and glanced around, and the result following his warning gave Tom Reid a chance to see what manner of man he must be.

Reid carried himself fairly well, Patent Pete had choked off the rush, Merry May had called a halt all along the line; but when the major spoke it seemed as though the combination, whatever it was, immediately dissolved.

"Ef you say so I guess I'll have to lis'sen; but ez fur this gent—p'r'aps he'd like ter take a walk outside, an' settle his sheer in it 'fur good an' all?"

The answer was coolly given, and the man straightened himself up, allowing his hand to drop away from his revolver. He appeared to have no fear of any attempt at foul play, and no eyes for the men Patent Pete was holding covered.

The latter were every whit as cool.

"Hold on, Pete!" exclaimed the nearest. "What fool notion is kicking you now? You are a chief, and we own right up to that; but you don't want to get up no racket with us, do you now? And can't a fellow crowd up to see what the fun is without your wanting to lift the top of his head off? Let up on us, or else give us a little show for a go-as-you please. This is no even start."

"Even start, nothin'! I'm not givin' you kids any start at all. You git a leetle start an' you'd have ther bulge. Steer off tell the rest git done, an' then you kin come at me three at a time, or six, an' I'll stand yer off bare-handed."

"We don't want to come at you nohow, Pete Potter, an' you ought ter know it. Ef we can't git no nearer to ther ruction yer might at least keep quiet enough fur us to hear what's goin' on."

Another one of the three tried his hand as spokesman, and if looks and tones went for anything he was telling pretty near the truth. Patent Pete appeared to look at his words as an unconditional surrender, and accepted them as such.

"That's all right, Brandy; but you ought to hev hed more sense than ter try ter rush a sport

ez I hev sot out ter train with fur ther evenin'. Put away yer pop-guns an' stand whar yer bin, an' yer kin do all ther listenin' yer wants ter—but onderstan' ef yer tries ter play a hand after tevin' passed out, Abe Collins kin summon a coroner's jury soon ez he wants ter, an' ther curpusses'll all be ready."

With this last bit of caution Pete dropped all concern for the men he had been holding in check, and turned his back on them with an utter recklessness, or else a perfect knowledge.

By that time Tom Reid was making his answer to the challenge he had received.

"My friend, you are either in rank bad humor with all mankind, or else you have some particular reason for starting up a game like this with a stranger. For fear it is the latter I may as well well settle you once for all. Step outside, where we will not be interfering with Mr. Vincent's business, and then you can make any arrangements you choose with my friend, here, Patent Pete."

"That suits me to a fracshun, an' ef ther major'll stand 'round an' see thet ther play are fair I'll hev all I want ter make me happy."

The major gave a keen look at the man on hearing this unexpected proposition. If appearances went for anything he was on the point of indignantly refusing when the fellow went on:

"All I ask for are fair play; an' that's somethin' I jest think I hev'n't been gittin' in ther game; an' I s'pect I won't have it afterward onless thar are someone behind me thet won't do ter fool with. You don't have to do a thing but keep a sharp eye peeled, onless yer sees foul play. Then, I guess I know who you are well enough ter know you'll stop it right thar, ef you hes ter top some wind erlong with it."

"Very well, sir. You are a stranger to me, but I do not see how I could well refuse to accede to such a request. And remember, when I start in, to see that everything is open and above-board, I am looking out for all parties concerned."

Reid listened, but he was not altogether convinced. Perhaps the two men were strangers—perhaps again they were not. He whispered to Patent Pete:

"Keep an eye on the major. If you don't want to chip, let me know if he tries to play me foul. There is more danger in him than in two of the others."

"Kayrect you be—ef he takes ther noshun. But you can bet on what he are sayin' now. Tie to him ez tight ez you choose an' he won't try ter throw off after he's made his promise. He'll see both sides over ther rifle."

For all the difference it would have made to the game, the party might have remained inside to finish the arrangements. Every man deserted the table except a couple who belonged there by right of occupation, and Merry May was left alone in her glory.

"Bank is closed," remarked the fair dealer to one of these.

"Look after the lay-out, and hustle the coin into the safe. There is no telling what all this means, and I am going to see."

Then, without waiting for answer, she touched her own revolvers to see that they were in place, and went on out with the rest.

Only a couple of hours in the town and here Tom was, going out to fight an unknown man, for an uncertain reason! If Major Burton had marked out his course for him, he could not have advised him of a way to play more completely into his hand, supposing he was the masked horseman who undertook to hold up the solitary traveler, and was trying to avenge his downfall upon that occasion.

Reid was thinking this over when Patent Pete touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"I say, pard, how do you want to have it? There's bin nothin' said yit how it is to be, but ef I don't mistook yer, you haven't much choice."

"You are not far off. Have it any way that is agreeable, and keep your eyes open that I don't have to down half of Silver Bend. When it comes to the pinch, I wouldn't be surprised to see them chipping in on his side."

Pete turned away toward the major.

The latter had been having a few words with his principal, and was ready to state his wishes, which were simple.

"Pistol, knife, or bare hands—any way at all will be satisfactory," was the answer to Potter's question.

"Better ner I could hev hoped fur. If you ain't hungry fur corpses, what do yer say ter settin' 'em up ter fight it out, hammer an' tongs, jest ez nature made 'em?"

The proposal was something of a surprise, though the major had himself opened the way to the making of it.

But it suited him well enough. Burton was handy with his hands, and enjoyed the sight of a mill. If he had been certain both men were adepts in the pugilistic art, he would have been enthusiastic. When he repeated the words of Patent Pete, he was surprised to hear the answer of his man:

"It's what I war wishin' fur. Ef he hes ther sand ter stand up—an' I b'lieve he hes—win or lose I'd give a hundred fur ther chance."

After that the preparations for the contest were soon made. Between the light of the full moon and the glare from the saloon windows it was possible to have a very good view of the affair, and the principals themselves were apparently content. With their hands well up, and their shirt sleeves well rolled up, they stood facing one another, sparring carefully for an opening.

Before half a dozen feints and guards had been made the major settled himself back to enjoy a treat. In spite of the difference in their styles the two men were masters of the pugilistic art, and it was not likely the contest would be decided in a moment, or by a single blow.

Until the very last Reid had not realized that his antagonist seemed to be even more of a stranger in the town than himself. So far, he had not heard his name mentioned, and though the actions of the men who attacked him from the rear indicated they might be friends, yet there was no certainty about it. To his surprise they had slunk away without a word, and if they were in the crowd of spectators they kept out of the front ranks, and held their peace.

The fact of the case was, the fellow had made his appearance at the saloon for the first time, so far as any one remembered, the previous evening, playing in tolerably hard luck. Who he was, or where he came from, were points on which no one had questioned him, and about which he had volunteered no information.

After a little the two men got together, each in turn leading with the left, and both failing to connect.

That one stroke, however, told the Sport a great deal. The man knew how to hit, and had already showed he understood the science of defense. It would not be so easy to get away with him, especially in a rough-and-tumble, such as this had been proclaimed to be.

The fight itself was a hurricane fight; and yet a thorough description of it might prove tedious. Ten minutes had elapsed without either getting in a knock-down blow, though more than one hard hit had been given and taken. With an eye to finding out whether the man had any better or weaker points, Tom Reid went boring in for a close.

"Now yer hits me whar I live," the fellow gritted, his arms suddenly clasping the Sport in a Herculean gripe.

"Ah! I've got yer where I wants yer!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY.

If the Sport had felt like saying anything it would have been simply to voice the words hissed into his ear. He was a good boxer; but he rather fancied that his wrestling was superb.

Yet it was too soon for either of them to say much. Once more the men appeared almost evenly matched, and though the stranger had the more desirable hold Tom Reid had the better grip. For a minute at the least the two tagged and strained, and when one gave back for a little, he as regularly regained the ground that had seemed to have been lost.

Tom never lost his wits.

He was so thoroughly at home in a contest of this kind his muscles acted almost mechanically, and he could actually watch every movement of his antagonist, and yet all the time be thinking of something else.

So it was he could watch the struggle as though he was having no part in it, and decide upon the points of the two wrestlers as coolly as though he was reading their history in the reticence of his own room.

He was not, then, at all abroad when, after a fiercer effort on the part of the other, which all but proved successful, he muttered to himself:

"There is not much to choose between us if everything was on a level basis, but with the hold he has he is bound to bring me down in the long run, and bring me down hard. Perhaps the best plan would be to let him throw me, and see that he does it easy like. Perhaps I could get a better chance then."

He knew the fellow was an adept, and that a trick of the kind was not without danger, but he believed it was the simplest way to save the energy, that would otherwise be wasted, and the extra exertion he would no doubt call upon his muscles to perform.

If he was going to try anything of the kind the sooner it was done the better. He appeared to brace himself for a fierce assay, wrenching at his antagonist until he was thrown on the defensive. Then, his foot seemed to slip.

The chance was too good not to be taken advantage of. Before the spectators had time to guess what was coming the Sport was up in the air.

The trouble was, he was in the air entirely too much to suit the man who threw him.

And his body did not touch the ground at all.

The gripe of each was broken, and Reid came down with his feet well under him; and was up-right again, watching for a chance to strike or seize, whichever presented itself first.

A shout went up from the spectators, but they scarcely knew what they were cheering for. Major Burton alone saw the game Reid had played, though Patent Pete, rubbing his cheek thoughtfully, began to suspect. At first, he had fancied it was all over with his friend.

It was well Tom had his wits about him.

Puzzled somewhat by the ease with which he had flung Reid aside, angered at losing his hold, and anxious to seize his man again before he had time to recover, the fellow darted forward, his hands up, but not altogether on his guard.

Before any one could see how it was done the Sport had met him more than half-way, had caught him, twisted him over his hip, and flung him into the air, heels up.

This time the cheers were if anything more hearty, and Reid, with his arms folded, stood watching the motionless body. He was not entirely sure he had not broken his man's neck.

It was a terrible fall, but though stunned the man did not altogether lose consciousness. After a few seconds he managed to struggle to his knees and then to his feet, where he stood for a little, weaving from side to side, and once turning completely around, at the risk of falling headlong.

Then he staggered over toward the major.

"Guess I'll take my coat," he mumbled thickly.

"This ain't my night on, an' next time I'll try cold steel, er stay out. With a sprain't shoulder thar's no use ter make me a choppin' block fur a man thet hits like him. It war a square game, an' ther bank kin keep ther stakes. Ain't that all I o'r ter say?"

"That's a heap plenty of yer means it," answered Pete, toward whom the man had turned his face as he spoke.

"But yer don't wantter go back on it, an' try ter eat yer words, 'thout a fair warnin'. He's a chief in town, now, an' ther boys'll swear by him, an' fight fur him."

"Rub it in ef yer hez a mind ter. I d'serve what I got, an' don't kick. Fact are, I think I'll git out ov town. So-long, pards. Much obleeged to yer all fur ther fair show I got, an' sorry I didn't give more fun; but it was ther best I hed."

Without another glance he turned as he finished speaking, and plodded off, no one offering to interrupt or accompany him. Truly, he seemed to have no friends.

The Sport looked after him thoughtfully.

"He goes away too lamb-like to be altogether done. I would sooner have him shake hands and order up the drinks; or else do a bit of kicking about 'most anything. No doubt I will see him later."

He was speaking more to himself than to Patent Pete, but the latter caught the words.

"Cayrect you be. But you done a big thing this time, an' thar's no use ter borry trouble about ther next tell it gits hyer. Ef I am about then you kin bet yer bottom dollar you'll have fair play. Reckon ther major wants ter say a word. You hit him whar he lives, an' he knows a good thing when he sees it."

Tom was not so sure about Burton, but met him cordially when he stepped forward; and stated plainly enough that he thought nothing of the stranger picking out the major as his second.

"If I had not already struck up an acquaintance with our friend, Patent Pete, I would have done the same thing myself. In a strange town a square man in your corner counts for half the battle."

"Thanks for the compliment; yet I understand the feeling, for I have been there myself. Vincent is the only person who is entitled to grumble; and as he is not about at present, and Merry May never grumbles at anything, I suppose we are well through the affair."

"Oh, you bet we're through with it," put in Potter.

"If any one thinks my pard didn't do his sheer fur ther sake ov fun he kin say ther word right now, an' I'll try an' prove he's a howlin'-suthin' else. Git in line, all ov yer thet wants ter j'ine, an' we'll show ther stranger round ther town. Silver Bend may be leetle, but thar's a heap sight ter see when ther right sorter keepers stirs up ther animiles."

He looked inquiringly at the major as he spoke, and the latter smiled and nodded.

"There's an ocean of good sense in what you say, Peter, but isn't it a little early to begin the prohibition movement? I'm afraid the reform won't last till morning."

"Oh, you just do us proud, majs. I war afeared yer wouldn't hev time ter j'ine in. It's never too early ter start in, a-doin' good. Guess we better leave Johnny's fur a base ov operashyns ter fall back on in case ther night are too young when we've made ther rounds. We'll hev a be-old time. An' ef it ain't askin' too much, major, won't you take command ov ther forces?"

"It has been some time since I helped put on the red paint, but under the circumstances, don't care if I do," answered the major, recklessly; and then added, in a stern tone:

"Fall in, men, and those who are afraid of the bigness of the load they will have to carry had

better go home, and get to bed. We are doing the honors of the town, and the stranger and I lead the procession."

Reid was not certain of what was to come, but he had his suspicions; and after the hard ride of the day, and the equally long one he expected on the morrow, he would rather have been excused.

"How many saloons are there in the town?" he asked, as he took the major's arm.

"Not more than twenty that we will care to go to. If we visit the rest there will be nothing left of them when we come away."

Reid shrugged his shoulders and looked back. The gambling saloon had been pretty thoroughly emptied, and very few of those who had come out to view the battle had left the spot.

Two by two the men fell into place as the head of the procession moved off, the major giving the time with an old-fashioned verve:

"Left! Left! Left! Right! Left!"

In very good time they all marched, the major leading the way to the next saloon, and never halting when the door was reached.

In they all filed, Burton and his charge stalking directly to the center of the bar, while the lines opened out, taking opposite sides of the room.

"Good-evening, Charley! We are doing the honors of the town to a stranger—Mr. Tom Reid, here, with whom I wish to make you all acquainted. Set them up for the house, and we request you all to join in."

"Charley" was a fat Dutchman, with a broad expanse of smile, and a still broader corporation.

One look was enough for him.

"Yah, mine herr. Dos ist goot. I vill have mine poy fetch der vheel-parrow, an' ve vill go 'long mit you."

Ten minutes were consumed at Dutch Charley's, in each man imbibing, in hunting up the boy with the wheelbarrow, and in closing the saloon for the night. Then, every man who had been in the house when the contingent from Johnny Vincent's arrived, with Charley, flanked by the boy with the suggestive conveyance, at the head, fell into the line, and all marched on to the next saloon.

The same programme, and a like ending. The proprietor fell in with the scheme, closed his doors, and headed his patrons.

"If we only had a brass band we could die happy," sighed Pete, as the little army moved off once more.

"Rest easy, Potter! We will get that at the next place we stop at—or something as good."

The major was leading the way toward the Happy Home, the house where Reid had fallen in with his friend, the Practical Plumber. They could hear the music in the distance, and the sounds of the trampling feet. It might be those who had been tripping the light fantastic toe would be willing to give up their amusement for the "prohibition movement," but Tom had his doubts. And they would have been strengthened if he could have seen Patent Pete's hands dropping mechanically toward his belt as they neared the house.

Then the music suddenly ceased without waiting to reach the end of a bar, and there was a silence in the distance.

"B'thunder, some gerloot hez got away an' kerried the news! Bet yer fity to a ten we'll find ther doors closed, an' Larry ready ter hump hisself!"

"They have the news, sure enough," said the major, pointing to several dark forms scuttling down the street.

"Those fellows think they would sooner be in bed; but I guess we will find enough here for fun," and as he spoke he threw himself heavily against the door.

CHAPTER IX.

FOUND BY THE WAYSIDE.

THE movement against the door was in the nick of time. A second or two later and the bolts would have been shot. It flew open, and without the least shade of hesitation the major stepped over the threshold, his movements a little accelerated by the vigor of his late attack.

"Just on time, Larry. I was afraid we might find the ranch closed, and everybody gone home. We were showing a stranger friend of ours around the town, and called to get your help to do the honors. Set them up for the house, if you please, before we start out. I am cashier for the evening, and of course what I say goes."

The latter words were added in a sterner tone, though so modulated as not to be actually offensive. Larry had waited sullenly for the speaker to come to a close, but there was an angry gleam in his eyes, and a nervous clinching of his hands, that suggested a storm was brewing.

"An' for why should Oi sit thim up? Sure, an' Oi closed me bar an hour ago, an' wor throyin' ter prevail on the b'yes to l'ave me to rheist in p'ace. It's no dhrinks Larry McGhee will be afther passin' over the bar this same noight."

"Sorry to hear you say it, for it always makes me weep when I see a good man trying

to make the mistake of his life. For ourselves it would not make so much difference; but for a stranger to carry away such a poor opinion of our town as you are trying to give him would be too distressing."

"Sorra a bit do Oi keer for ther sthranger. Sure, an av it's whisky he's wantin' he kin have all he can carry; but av Oi have to sthand tr'ate for the town there's not enough will be lift to opin me bar wid in the mornin'."

"Good enough, friend Larry," put in Reid, before the major had a chance to speak.

"Roll out the barrel to where I can see what is what, and when I get what I can carry the rest will stand back, and the doors can be closed in peace, or pieces, just as you want them."

"There it sthands, rowl it out yerself. It's sorra a hand will Oi lift on it. It's a load for a nagur, an' Oi'm powerful wake to-noight."

"So am I—for the want of good liquor—and if that is the best you have I'm content. It feels tolerably full."

Without hesitation Tom pushed past the Irishman, and behind the bar, to the barrel at which Larry had pointed.

The proprietor eyed him sourly, but made no motion to prevent his intrusion. In fact, he had, after a fashion, invited him in, even if it had been under compulsion. He had no idea what the Sport intended to do, but was somewhat surprised to see the easy manner he tilted it back with one hand.

"Full? sure an' it ought to be full. There's not bin more than wan good day's dbrinkin' out av it."

"And that wouldn't count if there was the usual quantity of water put back. Come on, boys. I guess I have about as much as I can carry, and a hog wouldn't ask for more. Allow Mr. McGhee to close his saloon, and I need not assure him that if he will join the procession he will be thoroughly welcome."

Before the crowd of interested spectators—for the irascible temper of Larry was well known, and nearly every man there was looking for a fight in spite of the odds against him—Tom canted the barrel a little further, stooped easily, gave a swing, and then marched off, calling back over his shoulder:

"Borrow a tumbler, one of you, for I suppose if I take it into the street that will be all the contract calls for."

"Howld on!" shouted Larry at this unexpected proof of the power of the stranger.

"Be the powers, it wad be a shame av Oi didn't know when Oi wor well b'ate. Set it down, me jewel, an' Larry will j'ine yez, sure enough; an' av there is wan av the b'yes here don't go wid the crowd, it's settle the insoult he will wid me."

"I always said you were a man of sense, and now I'll swear to it," exclaimed the major heartily.

"An' whoy wadn't Oi be?" asked McGhee as Reid eased the barrel gently down upon the bar, uncertain whether the structure would stand the strain.

"Av he wor put to it he could lift a toon, an' it wad be a boornin' shame for a mon loike that not to have the bist in the shop the fourst toime av ashkin'."

The danger of an explosion was over, and there was a chance the town would be painted up red enough to answer all the requirements of the case without bloodshed. When the crowd moved away from the Happy Home there were other worlds to conquer, but the worst of the task was over.

It is not worth while to follow through to the end what more than one Western reader will recognize as an actual scene. The major held his forces well in hand; and the last saloon in the place closed without any more riotous proceedings than have been already mentioned. When the crowd got around to Johnny Vincent's they found a lantern burning on the front porch, and by it a placard tacked up:

"Got tired waiting and went to bed an hour ago. The latch-string hangs out, though, and you can help yourselves. "VINCENT."

"This is white enough, boys," said the major, after reading out the card for the benefit of all.

"I guess we don't have to trouble him to-night. If some one will make the motion, congress will adjourn, giving three cheers for our friend here, Tom Reid."

"Move we edjourn with three cheers fur Tip-top Tom!" shouted Patent Pete, and as the chorus of ayes died away, he gave the signal:

"Hip! Hip!"

A little later the major stood by Reid's side, in front of the Giraffe, and whispered into his ear:

"The vermillion has been spread pretty thickly, and yet we have not a single corpse on our souls. Better luck than I counted on when we started in. Now, a word with you."

"A dozen of them, if you like. After the way you people have treated me I owe you all I can pay."

"We have shown you the town, and I have tried to make it pleasant for you, but don't you

gamble on that pointer. Something tells me we are not done with each other, by a long sight; and I warn you if the time comes when you stand in my road I'll shoot you without another word. So long, pard, and let us hope we will not see each other later."

Without waiting for answer the major stalked away, while Tom looked after him, muttering to himself:

"Thanks for expressing my own sentiments exactly. You may be very drunk, but you don't show it, and I suspect that is a true bill, filed for future reference."

With such a day as he had passed behind him, and another like it in front, the evening exercises were not exactly the thing, yet Reid never thought so, and slept as soundly, and woke as promptly, as if he had never gone out to promenade at all. It was hard to tell which was the fresher, he or Dandy, when he threw himself into the saddle, and started on the lope, out of town.

Dandy was in fine spirits. Handy Sim had taken the best of care of him, for which he had received another dollar; and the start was by no means an early one.

"I must say," thought the Sport, looking back toward the town with something like regret; "that for hard heads the boys there take the cake. They spread themselves all over the town, and there was not a decently-drunk man in the crowd. Dutch Charley was only weak because of his fatness, if he did come home in his wheelbarrow."

"All the same, I wouldn't care to engage too freely in such frolics. They might lead a fellow into bad habits. I won't want to drink again for a year."

The trail which he was to follow for the day was a lonesome one, and none too clearly defined after he had journeyed for a few hours.

He had provisions for himself, and grain for his horse, and by taking a short cut that led up to and across the mountains, he hoped to save a good many miles of travel, and to be able to proceed at almost the same rate of speed.

When he turned aside from the clearly-marked roadway, he did it with some faint misgivings that it was not exactly at the right place.

There was a bridle-path there, and as nearly as he could make out it led upward to the pass, which he could descry in the distance, but it seemed to him he had missed certain landmarks he should have passed before veering to the left.

"All right, though, if I strike water along about noon. That was the figure I invested my dimes on, and if it pans out according to schedule, I'll have a comfortable time, and know I am on the right road."

About the time the sun had climbed to a position immediately overhead, he felt satisfied that he had made no mistake.

Water was at hand, as he had expected to find it; and there was grass in plenty, and shade in abundance. There could not have been a place better suited to his wants, and he felt well satisfied to throw himself down on the turf and watch Dandy daintily picking at the grass in preparation for the grain that was soon to come.

"Hungry, are you, old fellow? Can't say that I feel so much so myself, but perhaps it will come after awhile. If I were to light a pipe, now, it might help the cause a little."

He drew out his brier, crammed it full of tobacco, and was about to strike a match, when he noticed Dandy prick his ears slightly, after his usual warning fashion when there was something in the distance that might want watching.

Dandy was standing where he would not be immediately seen, if at all, by any one coming along the thread of a trail, and his own position was fairly well sheltered. He dropped the match, thrust the pipe back into his pocket, and waited with some interest.

It was not likely there was to be any danger; and yet, it was a lonesome place, and Reid's instincts told him that a grain of caution would not be out of place.

"Horses, sure as you live; and riders of course. You can bank on Dandy every time! Now then, what do they want here?"

In a moment more he was keener than ever to know, for he had made out that while two of the party approaching were men, the third was a woman, who was also a young woman, and probably not at all enamored of the company of the hang-dog looking ruffians who rode, one on either side.

"We stop hyer fur grub," said one of the men, pulling in his horse, a movement followed by the others.

"We don't want no more sich games ez that you war tryin' ter give us. It wouldn't do yer a bit ov good ef yer did git away; an' you might hev a heap sight wuss luck than Numby an' me ter show yer ther way. Ef yer promises yer won't try ter cut up rusty ag'in we'll take ther bridle off. Ef yer don't, blamed ef we don't keep it thar tell we hev yer head turned fur ther Bend—an' p'raps a leetle longer."

"You think?" exclaimed Reid, hesitating not a moment after he had an inkling of how things were.

"Hands up there till we see what has been going on here," called out the Silver Bend Sport. "No fool business with me, for I've got you both lined."

CHAPTER X.

KNIGHT ERRANDRY OF MODERN TIMES.

THE Sport might have been pardoned for shooting first and speaking afterward, for on the face of affairs the young lady—and lady he knew she was, at a single glance—was a prisoner, and being subjected to treatment that had more than the suspicion of being harsh.

Her hands were tied together, not so tightly as to be painful, but sufficient to prevent the free use of them, and there was a lead-line attached to the bit of the horse on which she was riding, the other end of the strap being tied to the horn of the saddle of one of the men.

But Tom noted that the voice was not intentionally harsh, and that the lady was being treated with a certain amount of respect, and so the affair was something of a puzzle.

For that reason he held his hand until he could understand the case, or the actions of the men compelled him to use sterner measures still.

He was not prepared for what followed.

The ruffians neither remained still, nor did they show fight. In spite of the fact that the drop was undeniably on them, they risked the chances, and threw their horses about with a sudden jerk, clapping spurs to their sides as their heads pointed in a direction opposite from the unexpected danger.

There was an elegant chance to shoot them in the back, but that was too much like cowardice for Tom Reid to try it. Besides, with the enemy in retreat, the young lady gave him abundant employment.

When the men wheeled their horses they were in too great haste to think of the lead-line, and the third horse wheeled with them.

At the same time the young lady threw up her arms, and slid from the saddle.

She fell rather heavily in spite of the fact that she had been preparing for some such emergency, and for an instant lay motionless.

Reid barely hesitated long enough to see that the men were in full retreat. Then he dashed forward, and bent over the prostrate form.

"It only required a glance to see that the young lady was not so much senseless as motionless from having the breath knocked out of her body. She was already gasping for breath in a way that showed she would soon find it, and under his ministrations it only required the briefest time for her to recover sufficiently to sit up and raise to her face the hands which Tom had already loosened."

"There, there, miss! They are gone, and you are safe enough. Rest easy. You will be entirely yourself again by the time you have drawn three long breaths, so don't try to ask questions," encouraged her rescuer.

"And who are you?"

She looked up at him as she spoke, and there seemed to be a shade of suspicion on her face.

"Tom Reid at your service; my friends often call me Tip-top Tom, the Pard to Tie-to, so you may know you have fallen into fairly good hands."

"But if you are not in league with them how does it come I find you here? And why did they run away from you without fighting? The villains are not cowards to boot?"

"Perhaps not. They are most likely men wise enough to know when the drop is on them—as it certainly was when I called them down. I might have shot them but perhaps the other way answered just as well."

"Most decidedly, yes," answered the lady, recovering her coolness more and more.

"The surprise was as good as a pistol-shot. And who would have suspected to find any one here? Certainly, they did not."

"It was a fortunate chance. I left Silver Bend an hour later than I had intended or I would not have been on hand. And it was only at the last moment I decided to follow this route at all."

"And you are traveling away from Silver Bend! How unfortunate! What is to become of me?"

She had begun to think of herself again; and though a little before had made an attempt to escape, it had occurred to her that perhaps the company of the ruffians was better than none at all, in these wilds of which she was profoundly ignorant.

She wrung her hands in very interesting dismay, so that Tom, who was wondering between words how she came to be in such a plight, was more than ever interested, though he did not care to appear too previous until he was sure exactly what was the best course to pursue.

"I must reach Silver Bend, and as soon as I can. Indeed, it is a matter of life and death. But, how can I do it, when I am alone and on foot, and without knowing a step of the way? I was mad to try to make my escape from them. They at least treated me with respect, and would have guided me within sight of the town."

"And at my age I never thought of it! You

were to have the use of the horse till you got to the Bend, were you?"

"Oh, yes; and I never can walk, to say nothing about the fact that I do not know a foot of the way."

"Perhaps it was your horse that you were riding?"

"No, though I think it was as much mine as it was theirs. I believe they stole it."

"Then stay right here for a bit, and I will see what I can do for you. Here is a revolver, for use if need be, though it is not likely any one will come near you while I am gone."

"Thanks, but I have a revolver. What is it you are going to do?"

"Never mind. I will be back shortly."

The Sport had already given a short whistle, and now Dandy came trotting up, throwing himself upon his back, Tom dashed away in the direction the retreat of the two had been made.

As he vanished from the sight of Nellie Neville—for it was that unfortunate young lady—he was carefully looking at the coiled lariat which had been swinging from his saddle.

Of course, if the two outlaws had kept up the pace they had assumed on starting, it was doubtful whether Tom would be able to return at all as speedily as he promised.

But, he did not believe they had allowed their panic to drive them much beyond seeing distance, and he rather suspected they would come slinking back as soon as they recovered a trifle from their affright.

That they would be two to one, and desperately apt to shoot on sight, did not trouble the Sport at all.

"If they come at me on horseback I'll stick to Dandy," he thought; "but if the beggars are on foot I'll not run the chances. I might get them in the long run, but that would be poor satisfaction if anything happened to you, old fellow. I only hope they haven't retired for good."

It was hardly possible to effect a surprise, and so the next best thing was to come upon them as soon as possible. A word, and a light touch of the heel, gave Dandy to understand fast work was in order, and the mustang extended himself in great style. For a short distance he would hardly have done better if he had been running a race.

Then, the horse which Nellie had been riding came suddenly into view.

It was standing by itself, as though abandoned, and the lead-line trailed at its side, as it stooped its head to nibble at the grass.

If Tom had come at a slower pace he might have ridden up to it without difficulty; but the clatter of hoofs, and the sudden onslaught was too much for its nerves.

It tossed its head with a frightened snort, caught one glimpse of the coming man, and the lariat he was flourishing, and then was off.

But Tom was coming with a rush, and before the runaway got fairly settled to its work he was in casting distance, and the noosed rope was swinging over his head.

Then, the coil shot out straight and sure.

Only, as he was casting the Sport became aware he was not alone and unseen! Perhaps the two ruffians had been returning, and hearing him coming had drawn a little to one side. They hardly imagined what he was after, and as Tom's glance fell upon them they were throwing up their hands—and their hands were not empty.

There was not a second for thought. Indeed, what followed was done without any thought at all. Reid's right hand was following after the noose he had flung, but his left was near to his belt, and quicker than eye could see it had closed on the six-shooter which swung there.

To fling it up took but another second of time, and never dwelling an instant on his aim he pulled the trigger.

It was a snap-shot, pure and simple, and it was not wasted. The heavy bullet tore through the brain of the horse of the nearest outlaw, and the animal gave one convulsive plunge forward and dropped heavily, pinning by one leg, his rider to the ground.

Almost at the same time came the shock as Dandy braced himself to stop if necessary the horse around whose neck the lariat was already tightening.

But that animal had been through the mill before, and had no intention of making an unnecessary tumble. It halted as suddenly as it started, and Tom Reid, leaving Dandy to manage it, sprang to the ground, and pistol in hand darted at the remaining outlaw, who, confused by the fall of his comrade, had already wasted one shot, and was trying to take better aim for his next.

"Now I have got you!" shouted Tom, as the second ball whistled an inch above his head.

"Raise your thumb, or crook your finger again, and I'll drill you dead!"

The man had raised his weapon slightly to cock it, and its muzzle was pointing away over the shoulder of Reid, while the latter had him perfectly lined. He had but to tighten his finger a trifle and the man must go down.

"Stiddy yerself, then!" was the shouted answer.

"You can't take one side ov me, an' ef you

don't draw off somebody hes got to go down, an' it won't be me."

"Who the thunder wants to take you? I'm not a thief-taker! But I do want the horse the lady rode, and if I shot you both for your treatment of her it would be serving you about right. You throw down your belt, and help your pard out from under his horse. The next time, perhaps, you won't be so fresh with your firearms till you see what it is a gentleman wants of you."

"Straight goods, that?"

"Straight, and a yard wide. Last warning. You can pick up the tools when you get through your contract, and I am out of sight."

"Down she are, and it would hev saved a heap ov trouble ef you hed said what you wanted in the first place."

"Or if you had held the age till the other fellow had made his remarks about the strength of his hand."

Down went the fellow's belt; and without waiting for further speech Reid paid his attentions to the captive animal at the noosed end of his lariat. A little later he made his appearance again to Miss Nellie, who was seated on the spot where she had been left, but was handling her revolver nervously. The firing she had heard had been somewhat alarming.

"Here you are!" exclaimed Reid, as he dashed up. "A bite of dinner first, and then you can start for Silver Bend. If it is so important for you to get there I will show you the way myself."

CHAPTER XI.

NELLIE NEVILLE UNDERTAKES A MISSION.

It may be interesting to go back a little and explain how it came Miss Nellie was on the road to Silver Bend under such guidance.

Mrs. Neville and her daughter, in the hands of the outlaws, had not been having such an uncomfortable time as might have been supposed.

Indeed, a package of goods supposed to be worth ten thousand dollars would very naturally be handled with some care by any party sane and in right mind.

There appeared to be no danger of suffering from starvation, their bed, though none of the softest, might have been worse, and the masked girl who acted as her jailer was kind and attentive if very firm. And for twenty-four hours nothing more was said in regard to the ransom.

By that time confinement began to grow monotonous.

Mrs. Neville broached the subject which she had vowed a hundred times to herself that she never would. She asked Masked Mira how they expected her to procure so large a sum as that demanded from her.

"It is not my affair. I am not a confidante in such matters. You should have asked the general at the time. Now, he is not here, and it is uncertain when he will return."

"But, surely, you have some idea on the subject?"

"The general makes few mistakes when he undertakes to do business. He no doubt was aware that you either had that amount at command, or had friends who would furnish it at your request. He has a long head, and can see a great ways."

"If I were at liberty, so that I could apply in person, it is possible I could procure a certain amount, though nothing like so large as the figure named."

"Write to your friends, then, and see how much they might be willing to do. There will be no difficulty about your letter being delivered. I can guarantee that it will be safely carried."

"Never. I would not—"

Mrs. Neville stopped suddenly. It struck her that her words had told more than she intended, few though they were.

She had as good as admitted that she had friends within reaching distance. At the same time an idea struck her, that she wondered she had not sooner thought of. Might it not be possible to at least get Nellie away from here, and perhaps provide for her own rescue at the same time?

"I hope you are not going to continue in that obstinacy too long," answered the masked girl, coldly.

"Free boarding cannot last forever; and if it could I would be getting tired of the farce myself. I am sure, I think some consideration is due us. Do you not think you are acting very selfishly when you talk that way? It seems to me, right-minded persons would do their very best, even at a little sacrifice of pride, when they see what a regular deadlock we are all at."

Mrs. Neville opened her eyes. Mira appeared to be speaking in good faith, and it gave her an idea how her obstinacy was viewed by the other side.

She reflected a little before answering.

"For reasons which it is not necessary, nor expedient, to name, it is impossible for me to write such a letter as you are urging me to. If I can procure a dollar beyond what was in my

possession when I was taken, it must be by a personal statement to an individual whom I have reason to believe I might find at or near Silver Bend."

"And I have as plainly told you that until your ransom is paid you will not be allowed to hold an interview with any one. There would be too much risk for us; and you would not be half as much interested in success. You will simply write, I must have ten thousand dollars. After that your friends can make up their minds about the rest. My opinion is, they will send it without any question."

"Either you have learned a great deal by experience, or you are all crazy together! No. I will not write such a letter—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless my daughter is sent as the messenger. To her I can explain what I could not to another living soul; and through her statements there might be a possibility of success."

Mrs. Neville spoke desperately, but in earnest. Somewhat to her surprise her words were seriously taken.

Mira did not at once answer, and madam would have given something worth while if she could have had a fair view of her face while she thought the proposition over. It was a great relief when the masked girl at length responded slowly, and with an air of one who had made up her mind:

"I am not sure but what you have hit upon the best thing we can do, provided we are certain your daughter will be in earnest. At the same time, if she fails your own danger will be increased. It may be that your separation would be eternal."

Nellie had been a listener to the conversation, but so far had not offered to interrupt. She broke in now:

"If you doubt my earnestness send her, and I will remain as the hostage. Surely there can be no danger then that she will not do her utmost—and what more can be done?"

"A very pretty scheme on the face of it, but it will hardly work. Allow me to say, we understand our work better than an outsider can; and further explanation is unnecessary. The original proposition will be taken into consideration, and I will let you know about it when I come again. Meanwhile you can be instructing your daughter, so that no time will be lost in case it is decided to send her on her mission. And you cannot too deeply impress upon her the fact that she will have to keep silent upon everything but the fact that you are a prisoner, and must have money."

Mrs. Neville was not too deeply immersed in her troubles to think of anything else.

"She is a strange girl," she said, when Mira had departed.

"What can a person of her evident education and good manners be doing here?"

"She is evidently the daughter of the head scoundrel," replied Nellie, with proper scorn. "She is in his confidence, no doubt; and of the two I believe I would sooner deal with him."

The mother smiled after a ghastly fashion.

"Your chances would be better, but your risks greater. In our circumstances I am afraid she is our strongest hope. At all events, I think it best to follow her advice and waste no time. Let me explain to you the only chance there is for me to obtain the ransom they demand. There is a man by the name of Herbert Kenton living near to Silver Bend, and if he is the Herbert Kenton I once knew it is within the range of possibility that he will loan me the amount."

"Ah! Herbert Kenton! I never heard the name before. Is he one of your old friends?"

"No. Or—yes. Perhaps I might call him a former friend. Ask me no questions. It is not so easy to explain. I must think over your message. And it will never do to send you to him ignorant of the truth. Yet how shall I explain it?"

If the anguish in her tones went for anything it was certainly a difficult thing for Mrs. Neville to bring herself to the explanation of which she spoke.

Yet she must have seen her way through at last, for after due caution, and an oath which a young lady of Miss Neville's stamp would hardly care to break, Nellie was started on the way to Silver Bend, under the guidance of the two men with whom Tom Reid found her.

Of these men she was, from the first, desperately afraid, though they were on the strictest of good behavior. When she had traveled some distance, and thought she had mastered the direction in which lay Silver Bend, she made an effort to escape.

What the result was, the reader has already learned.

"Thank you—a thousand times I thank you!" she exclaimed, as Tip-top Tom announced his intention to guide her to the Bend.

"I know it is accepting a vast deal, but really, what else can I do?"

"Nothing at all, so far as I can see. You might reach it alone, but I have my doubts; and then, you would be in a state of fright all the way there. If I can in any other way be of

service, command me. I would hardly be as white as I hope I am if I was not altogether at your disposal."

That settled the matter.

He talked in the tone of a man who had made up his mind; and Nellie did not attempt to change his opinion as to his duty. Her spirits rising in the reaction after the latest trouble, she actually became a very pleasant little woman once more, and enjoyed the lunch which Tom spread on the grass, in spite of the danger of interruption which she could not help but suspect.

After lunch they set out for the town.

It was quite a long ride, and would hardly be reached before evening. Dandy was as fresh as when he started, but Nellie was already tired, and Reid did not feel inclined to force the pace, since he did not want the young lady to break up while she was on his hands.

He could understand that her business was something of importance, but as she had said nothing of its nature he did not attempt to question her.

There were plenty of other subjects, however, and in spite of her evident preoccupation, Tom sometimes succeeded in drawing her out. The ride was not, to him, at least, an altogether disagreeable one; while his chatter made her, more than once, forget her own troubles.

"You have friends in Silver Bend?" he asked, as they drew near the town.

He had already asked the question in a more indefinite manner, and without a satisfactory answer. As some hours had elapsed since then he thought it possible she might be willing to be more confidential.

"Not in the town; but I hope to find one—or, at least, a friend of my mother's—near there. I wonder if it will be too late to seek him out to-night?"

"It will depend upon the distance. Unless your business is very urgent I should advise you to obtain a good night's rest before attempting to attend to it. You are more tired than you think—and, if things did not go exactly right I am afraid you might grow hysterical."

"I dare not delay except under compulsion, though, if the distance is at all great it will not be worth while for me to attempt to search for the residence of a stranger in the darkness. I will decide when I know more about it. It is not far now to the town, but the darkness is coming rapidly."

Reid was not altogether satisfied in his mind what was the best course for the young lady to pursue.

After the way he had racketed around town the previous night he was hardly the best material out of which to make a protector and sponsor for an otherwise unattended young lady; and at the Giraffe, if Sammy Ward continued to hold his eccentric notions in regard to the other sex, he was afraid she would not be able to obtain accommodation. Whether there was any other hotel in town where he would like to leave an unprotected female he was not so sure.

"Let us hope her friend is within available distance," he muttered to himself, as they entered the town, and trailed along the dusky street leading to the Giraffe.

"We can at least inquire of Ward, and if the old man gives me any of his nonsense I will take great pleasure in knocking him down myself."

They drew up in front of the hotel, at last, and Reid dropped out of his saddle.

"Hello, Mr. Ward! This way a moment!" he called, seeing the figure of the landlord standing just beyond the doorway.

"I reckon not," was the answer, and the not very unexpected one.

"Ag'in' my principles, ez you ought ter know. But ef yer hez ary questions yer don't keer ter hev ther town hear you kin come on ther porch long enough ter ask 'em."

"Blame your principles; and blame the town. Do you know where Herbert Kenton's ranch is, and how far it is from town?"

"In course I do. It's jest ten mile; an' ef you want ter make it afore bedtime yer better git a mighty big move on. Ther road's ther wu'st from hyer ter Texas."

And just then, a man who had come swaggering—swaggering so much that he was almost staggering—and who had stopped at the question, and looked up in a dazed sort of way at the face of the young lady in the saddle, exclaimed:

"Great heavens, it is Nellie!"

Then the man, who was Major Burton, threw up his hands and tumbled over backward.

CHAPTER XII.

HANDY SIM HEARS A PLOT.

THE Sport heard the noise, but did not distinguish the words. When he looked in that direction he recognized the major, and would have stepped down to aid him had it not been that he was forestalled in his intention.

The man whom he had heard called Jimmy when engaged in chaffing the landlord had been near, and sprung to Burton's side as he fell.

Some one else had also stepped in from the

other side, and between the two he would not lack for ministrations. Tom turned back to the landlord.

"Look here, old man, I am in temporary charge of a young lady, who may have to go on to the ranch to-night. I can't waste time running around, hunting up a decent place for her to get supper, and I know there is no other house where it would be as good when we did find it, so you have got to take us in. The lunch we had at noon didn't go as far as it might have gone if it had been twice as big, and we are both almost starved."

"So yer orter be, an' it's ag'in' my principles, an' thar will be no end of bad luck ter foler, no doubt; but fur once, an' jest that fur, I'll spend ther rules in yer favor. Ef yer really are goin' ter Kenton's ranch ter night yer better take ther ole man's advice an' wait ter start till ther moon rises."

"Thanks for the advice, and I'll take it if the lady will listen to reason. Where's Handy? The horses must be looked after as well as ourselves. They have had the worst part of the pelt to-day, anyhow."

"Hyar ye be," squeaked a familiar voice at his elbow.

A few words sufficed to explain the position of affairs to Miss Nellie.

She was somewhat taken aback when she heard the ranch was still ten miles away, and the roads too difficult to travel until the moon rose.

Of course, there was little choice in the matter, and she allowed Reid to assist her to dismount without a word of objection, though she expressed her regrets strongly enough.

"Never mind, miss, you will be all the better for the rest, and really you would not be able to go on if you did not take that, and something to eat. And the horses need a little caring for, too. A few hours will make but little difference in your affairs, and you had better lose them than tumble over dead beat at the crisis."

He spoke hastily, and with the intention of distracting the attention of the young lady from the major, who had recovered partially, and was being assisted away.

The truth was, Reid had an idea that the major had been carrying on with the same spread he had been sailing under the night before, and had been finally obliged to succumb.

By a natural coincidence, Miss Neville—without knowing anything about the case—had arrived at the same ultimate opinion, and paid little attention to the major after his fall. She was too full of her own affairs to feel either pity or disgust for a drunken man.

Handy took the horses; and the two entered the hotel together.

As some little time had to elapse before supper would be ready, Reid left the young lady in the waiting-room, and went out to inquire more about the ranch and the road thereto, and the exact time of the rising of the moon.

He came back, satisfied at all points, and supper being ready, the two went to the table with appetites doubly sharpened, and did full justice to every thing—the hot coffee especially.

There was one thing the Sport had neglected to do, and that was to beat up the stables, and see how his horse was thriving.

If he had confided less in the boy into whose charge he had placed the animals he would have done so; and thereby have learned a point or two.

The stables attached to the Giraffe were by no means extensive or well appointed, but they answered their purpose. As Dandy had tested their hospitality he was not averse to being led thither; and the other horse followed without hesitation.

Sim tied them in their stalls, and saw them attack the hay with keen relish. About the time he thought he should be looking for their grain he heard two men conversing in a low tone, just outside.

The boy was both shrewd and inquisitive, and scented a mystery by instinct after he had heard the first few words. One of the men he knew must be Major Burton; while he thought he recognized the voice of the other as belonging to Ten-cent Jimmy.

The latter was an *attache* of the hotel after a certain fashion. He boarded there when he had the means, and when he did not he was apt to be found as an employee, on the other side of the rows of chairs round the guest table. He was no mean hand as a waiter, and as Ward allowed no female employees in the house, was rather a privileged character.

"What have you learned about them?" was the question of the major, as the two seemed to meet.

"Not much that you didn't know before, I guess. It's the same Sport you led around town last night, and he hasn't said a word of how he comes to have the young woman in tow."

"She is young, then, is she?"

"No discount on that unless she knows a trick in make-up away beyond me. Not more than twenty, at the outside."

"And they were inquiring the way to Kenton's ranch?"

"He was; and I guess it was on her account, for I heard him tell her they couldn't go on till

the moon rose. Must be in a hurry if they are going to try the gulch trail a night like this."

"Strange, strange," muttered the major, thoughtfully.

"What can it mean? Two faces never could be so like, and—you are sure they intend to go on to-night?"

"That is what they figure on. They would have started right on if it had been light enough. As it is, they are going to have a bit of rest and some supper."

"There was no hint let fall of why they were going?"

"Never a hint. But it looks to me as though the Sport just stumbled against her to-day, and agreed to see her through. They don't act like old friends, or as though there was anything between them."

"If I could only have kept my wits about me! But I had to drop as though some one had struck me with a club. There is no luggage that could be examined; no way of finding out where they came from, and what they want of Kenton?"

"Not enough baggage to fill a handkerchief, and if they carry any private documents, I don't know where they put them. The Sport knows, perhaps, but from what I have seen of him I don't think he is exactly the man I would like to ask questions."

"No; but I must find out something more. They must not go on to-night."

"That's all right, to say, major; but I don't see how you are going to stop them unless you try a dose of this."

Jimmy dropped his hand on the butt of his revolver significantly. He had no actual idea of trying conclusions with Tip-top Tom with such weapons, himself; but there was no telling what the major might be willing to do.

"No, no! That will not answer. You mistake me. Jack might be better than his master when it came to shooting; and I do not wish to do him any serious harm—for the present."

"Might dose his horse, then. Get it good and sick, and he would have to wait whether he wanted to or not."

"Off again. Unless I have read the fellow wrong from heel to forehead, he will keep his promise, if he has to go on foot. You must dose him."

"Good glory! How do you expect me to get at him? He is a keen one, I tell you, and would wring my neck if I tried it on."

"Fudgel! There is nothing easier in the world."

"You wait on the table—Ward will ask you to do it anyhow, if you are around. Drop into his coffee a dose I will give you, and he will not think of Kenton's ranch for the next ten hours."

"If he ever does?"

"Oh, I give you my word I do not intend to poison him—till I know more. It is the exact truth I am giving you. Come, now. It is worth a hundred dollars to you, and no risk, to put a few drops of something good into his coffee."

"And if I don't?"

"You can guess. — make a good friend, but you hardly want to find out what I am as the other thing."

"You got me, and you know it. If you want me to give him the dose, you will have to hurry up. Supper must be pretty near ready now."

"Wait here, then, till I come back. I will be gone but a minute."

The major hastened away, while Ten-cent Jimmy stood pondering over the business he had in hand. He did not like it any too well, but a hundred dollars looked very large just then; and there were certain reasons why he felt compelled to nod as the major winked.

By and by, just when he thought he heard the major coming cautiously back, he heard also a slight noise in the stable.

If he had been as cool as he usually was he would have remained perfectly quiet until satisfied what had made it. Instead, he uttered a low, hissing:

"Ha!"

It was scarcely above a whisper, but Handy Sim knew his presence was suspected, if not discovered, and that if he remained there he would be overhauled in no time.

What the two would do to him he could only guess, but no doubt it would be something terrible. His resolution was taken on the instant.

"Say, Jimmy," he whispered, loud enough to be heard by the man outside. "Gimme ten dollars an' take me in on ther ground floor. I'll help yer do ther work, an' keep mouth shet tight ez a clam."

"Come out here and we'll talk the matter over."

Jimmy spoke as though he was not particularly startled by the proposition; but he was silently slinking toward the door, ready to seize on the youngster the moment he made his appearance.

Handy was wise, however, and was trying the same game. While Jimmy was speaking he was dropping out of a window on the opposite side of the stable.

Once on the ground and he struck off like a deer—and ran straight into the arms of the major, who seized him by the shoulder, swung

him from the ground, and clapped a hand over his mouth. Handy squirmed, and tried to cry out, but it was no use. He was a prisoner; and Jimmy, recognizing the captor, came hastily forward.

A few words sufficed to explain the matter as he understood it.

"All right. The kid shall have his ten dollars; but I'll see that he keeps his mouth shut until morning. By that time there will be nobody to believe his story, and he will get himself in a heap of trouble if he tries it on. Ward is looking for you. Hurry up."

CHAPTER XIII.

WHILE TIP-TOP TOM IS SLEEPING.

WHEN supper was over Reid thought of Dandy and the boy who was taking care of him.

He advised Miss Nellie to lie down for a nap of an hour or so, and said he would see she was awake at the proper time, if she failed of herself to arouse. Just now, he would go out and see that the horses would be ready saddled when the moon rose.

He was beginning to feel strangely now, but attributed it to the fact of having slept so little the night before.

By the time he was out in the open air his actions became mechanical; before he knew anything else he was asleep.

If Jimmy had been an artist in the line of work he had undertaken he would have stuck to Tip-top Tom until he had obtained his revolvers, or at least found out where he went to.

But when he had once accomplished the work set for him to do he thought of nothing else, and got away to the Happy Home as soon as possible, so as to be out of the way of any possible inquiries.

The major, too, had marched off with his prisoner, and Miss Nellie was left to her own devices.

It was easy enough to tell her to sleep; but she could not sleep. She had too much on her mind at present. It was worse than being a prisoner among the outlaws.

As a duty, she laid down and closed her eyes; but she was never more awake, and the incidents of the past few days were passing through her mind in an ever-recurring procession. Inaction seemed a crime, and she began to think it would be better risking her neck along the gulch trail, in the darkness, than lying there doing nothing.

She fought against the feeling, however, having some sort of a hope that her nerves would quiet down after a time, and it may be that at one time or another she dozed a little. At all events, she rose up with a start, counting the strokes of a clock in the adjoining room.

She knew that if there was any mistake at all it must be on the wrong side.

Stroke after stroke she heard, and it came upon her like a shock that in fifteen minutes the moon would be up, and she should be on her way to Kenton's ranch. What had become of her guide?

She went out to look for him, or, at least, to make inquiries about him. If she had asked whether the clock struck one too many, or one too few, it might have been more to the purpose; but of course she never thought of that.

Sammy Ward was in the office, and did not seem charmed to see her.

"Dunno ez I kin help yer any," was his careless answer.

"I'm a-runnin' this place 'thout ary license but me own, an' ez a rule females ain't admitted. I tole him you might rest byer, an' take a bite, but I didn't let myself fur ary further trouble. He went out, an' he ain't come back. Guess he's got inter a game at ther s'loons an' furgot all about ther ranch. I'll never tell yer whar ter find him."

"But I must go on at once, and he had promised to guide me. If I cannot find him what shall I do?"

"Git somebody else, blame it! Ef he's got a good thing on hand he kin 'ford ter pay expenses better then he kin ter bu'st a run ov luck. Ther ain't no sence in thinkin' ov it."

"But who shall I get? I am a stranger here, and do not know whom to ask, or trust."

"Dog-gone it, yer can't expect me ter be 'tendin' to it. Ther boys'd laff me head off. But fer ther sake ov ther Sport, who ain't a half-bad feller, I'll sing out, an' maybe somebody kin tell whar he's ter be found."

It was a great concession for the woman-bater to make; but it ended in nothing, so far as Tom Reid was concerned.

Half a dozen men, who had scattered themselves pretty thoroughly around the town during the evening, had neither seen nor heard anything of him.

"But, if ther lady wants ter go ter Kenton's ranch, an' kin make it wu'th while, an' 'll pay fur a hoss, it wouldn't be hard ter git some one ter show her ther way. I kin do it meself."

So suggested the last of the speakers, and Nellie, hearing him, broke in eagerly:

"Thank you, sir. It is the only thing I can do; and I dare not waste time looking further for him. If there is no doubt about your knowledge of the way I will accept your kind offer."

If Miss Nellie had been more experienced in the ways of the West, and had not been discouraged by the peculiarities of Sammy Ward, she would have had little trouble in finding a more acceptable escort, and at a nominal cost—though the man who offered himself was well enough in his way, looking like a hard-working miner.

As he seemed to be anxious to start at once she was all the more favorably impressed, and the fact that he said that he could hire a good horse for the occasion seemed to be a sort of guarantee of his responsibility.

Dandy was in the stable, none the worse for his ride of the day, but though he had been promised for the trip it was only conditionally, and owners were to ride. Miss Nellie would not have thought of taking him without permission; and her guide understood too well the ethics of the camp in regard to horseflesh to suggest the doing of it. Sammy Ward would have drawn a line right there.

So it happened that a full hour before the moon really did rise the young lady was making her arrangements; and with such success that not half an hour after the striking of the clock which had alarmed her she was settling herself in the saddle for the dreary ride before her.

In her excitement she had not thoroughly marked the lapse of time, and it was not a matter of comment with her that the moon had not yet risen when they trotted out of Silver Bend. The first part of the way was plain enough, and long before they reached the dangerous places no doubt it would be light enough.

For some time after they started the two rode along in comparative silence.

When he did speak the guide was respectful, and appeared to have no doubts as to his knowledge of the way, or the possibility of getting to the ranch long enough before morning.

"Dangersome? Oh, yes. Ther's a place or so whar it would be bad for a party to take a spill in the dark; but afore we reach 'em ther moon'll be up—strikes me she o'rt ter be on hand about now," he said, in answer to a question.

"I bin over it often ernuf so ez I orter know it with my eyes shut, but it might be awkward fur a stranger unless ther war some one on hand ter keep him frum goin' over ther bridge in ther dark, or wanderin' off whar ther road turns, an' gettin' a tumble inter the devil's sluice. Ther are somethin' I'm more afeared ov than either; but guess we ain't like ter meet it this trip."

"What is that?" asked Nellie, anxiously.

She thought it was wisdom to post herself about all the dangers of the road.

"Road-agents, miss. Ther gang trains behind ther man they call General Principles."

"Oh!"

She gave a little cry in spite of herself. There was of course small danger for her from the outlaws, since she was, in a measure, their agent, but she could not repress a shiver at hearing the name of their leader, and fancying he might be in the neighborhood.

"Queer sorter name, that, but it's ez good ez any. They say ther 'riginal gang hed a man at ther head ez war allers talkin' 'bout them things until it got fixed on him fur a kind ov name, an' that when he got killed off another feller took ther name ter Kerry on the same old business. Queer sorter man he must be, ef all they say ov him are true."

Then, being mildly questioned, he went on to tell some stories of the outlaw, and beguiled the way with bits of history which had a tendency to make Miss Nellie's hair raise.

"But what would he be doing along a road like this?" asked Nellie, reverting to the idea of meeting the outlaws on the way to Kenton's.

"They certainly do not wander around, pickin' up victims after a hit or miss style! I thought such men confined their attention to stages, and travelers who carried a great deal of money."

"Fur ther most part, so they do. But a traveler who kin git money are most ez good ez one thet hez it; an' take it all 'round, I don't keer ter meet 'em."

"But if you should, what then?"

"Pends on ther size ov ther gang. Ef you hev ther nerve ter foller I might give 'em a shot er two fur good-luck, an' try ter bu'st through."

It had been growing lighter at last, and he held up his revolver as he spoke, with a significant gesture.

"Better not—except as a last resort. You have little to fear from men of that stamp, and I have a hope they will let me pass when they understand I am penniless, especially if I give them a hint of my mission. But if they do not—then, I would be ready for the fight, and perhaps I might do my share. At all hazards I must get through. Nothing must be allowed to stop me now."

"I reckon you have the nerve," said the man in an admiring tone.

"Ef ther chance do come you give ther word, an' you'll find me all thar, jest ez you want me."

He spoke bravely, but his courage had to be tested; and the test came very soon.

"If you please," said an unexpected voice, almost at their sides; "up with your hands, Mr. Man; and you, young lady, rein in your horse! We want you."

"You are mistaken," answered Nellie, calmly, though the challenge was a shock, without a doubt.

"You or some others like to you, have already captured all my wealth, and I am on my way to try to gather in a little more for your benefit. Let me pass with my guide for your own sakes."

"On general principles we might be willing to let you do it; but this is a different matter. There may be some mistake, but you must explain that to the general."

"Stand back, sir. I have tried submission once; this time I mean to try fight. Out of the way, or—"

Her hand flew up and as it came the thumb cocked the revolver it carried as deftly as though she was a man with a record. If she had pulled trigger she would have dropped the self-confessed outlaw on the instant.

Instead of that she spoke sharply to her horse, struck him with the little spur on her heel, and with a shout to her guide to come on, attempted to dash through.

But no guide came, and if she had listened for it she could have heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs some distance back on the trail.

The man in front without hesitation or undue haste leaned forward and caught her by the wrist, forcing her hand upward, while another mounted man appeared on her other side, and two more in front of her.

"You see," said the original speaker, "you are up to a performance not down on the original talls, and we must take care of you."

His gripe on her wrist saved himself, perhaps, but it went some distance towards defeating his object.

Under the touch of Nellie's spur her horse gave a forward spring, and though the grasp of the outlaw was broken it held long enough to bring him almost, and Miss Neville altogether, out of the saddle.

The fall was not a hard one. When the young lady saw she had to go she sprung lightly to the ground, and without pause or hesitation darted into the shadows by the side of the trail.

"Look sharp, and after her, boys!" shouted the leader.

"She's worth ten thousand and if she gets away there will be merry Satan to pay."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PERILS OF THE WAY.

TOM REID, revolvers and all, was not ten feet away from Miss Nellie, when, in her anxiety to be off, she accompanied her guide to the stable, to get out her horse. The wonder was she did not bear his low breathing as he slept serenely in one corner, concealed by a pile of fodder.

He had thrown himself down, conscious of nothing but a great desire to close his eyes and rest. Afterward, a cannon would not have awakened him. Burton and his ally had done their work well.

There was one thing they had not counted on, and scarcely one man in a thousand would have thought of it, since it would not have counted with one man in a thousand.

When the Sport threw himself down he had not forgotten he was to leave the Bend at the rising of the moon.

The resolve was present with him just as much as it had ever been, and his body intended to go, awake or asleep, dead or alive, whether his mind had anything to say on the subject or not.

Promptly as the moon rose Dandy came out from the stable.

He was saddled and bridled, and Tom Reid was leading him. The eyes of the Sport were closed, but he stepped out with as much firmness and certainty as though they were open, and when fairly out of the way of the stable he checked the horse long enough to mount, and then, giving the animal his head, started off at a swinging gallop, in the direction of Kenton's ranch.

He was just in time with the start, too; for as he got fairly under way he was brought almost face to face with Major Burton.

The major started, looked up at the horseman, recognized him, and threw his hand back. For an instant it was an uncertain thing whether the Tip-top Sport would reach Kenton's ranch or not.

But the major saw that he was alone. There was no one within hearing distance down the trail, and no one following from the Giraffe. He held his hand, and went on to the hotel.

There he was barely in time to catch Sammy Ward. It was already past the proprietor's usual bed-time.

"Had to give up to the general principle this time, did you, old man?" he laughed as he stepped in.

"For once there is a lady stopping at the Giraffe—and if looks go for anything I'll swear the place will be none the worse for it."

"Oh, you, quit! 'Thar's no female hyer. She coul'n't wait, an' went along down ther road an hour ago, with Dan Draper ter show her ther trail."

The information startled the major. He had supposed that if Tip-top Tom failed her the young lady would give up the trip, for the night at least; and by the time morning came around he would know better whether she ought to go at all.

"And you let her go off with a galoot like that to take care of her! Why, curse it, Ward! why didn't you send a wooden man and be done with it?"

"He war her own pick an' ch'ice, an' what hed I ter do with it? Ef it hed bin some men ez might hev offered I'd a kicked, sure ernuf, but Dan are honest ez any of 'em, an' knows ther road a leetle better. What's goin' ter happen to her a night like this?"

"An hour ago, you say?" asked the major, ignoring the question.

"Mebbe not a hour ago, but it war that much back ez she war lookin' round fur ther Sport ez hez bin lookin' out fur her eenterests, an' it wa'n't ser long after that she got started."

"And what was the Sport doing, all this time? I met him starting out as I came up to the house. It is a wonder she would go off and leave him."

"That so? Good fur him. He come ter time after all. He'll be apt ter ketch up with 'em long ernuf afore they git ter ther ranch. I tho't she war makin' a fool ov herself, startin' a hour afore ther 'p'inted one, but it wasn't my say-so. Ef he war'n't sayin' pleasant words I'll bet he war thinkin' 'em. Eh?"

"I can't say, as he didn't address himself to me. But if I had been in his place I would have come in here and straightened you out before starting. But that will probably keep till he gets back. And if she has had any trouble on the way you can expect me to come along with him and see that he does full justice to the subject. I have seen cranks before, but for honory, low-down meanness in that line you take tae cake."

The major spoke as though he meant it, and swung out of the room before Sammy could even start the framing of an answer.

"Curse the boy!" thought the major to himself as he strode away to find his own horse.

"Was he sharper than he knew when he led me the dance he did around half the prospect holes in the district, always just going to give in, and always keeping just out of reach until the time for the moon to rise was about on hand, and then dropping me? Half a dozen times I had drawn to shoot him, but I never was sure it would not make a bad matter worse."

"And Jimmy lied to me a minute ago, when he told me the Sport had swallowed the dose. Curse his lack of nerve! It might have saved more bloodshed than he dreams of if he had got in his work. There's nothing better now to do than to follow on, and see what move Kenton will be up to when they get there. Perhaps I can overtake the Sport before he joins her. It may have been but a chance meeting on his part, and he may know nothing at all about her. Better for him if he does not."

The major had a good mount, as Tip-top Tom had had occasion to observe, and he succeeded in getting out of town without observation.

Once on the road and Dandy had gone off at a gait hard to equal.

Yet he ran level and true, as though recognizing the fact that his rider was to be cared for.

Reid had naturally the firmest of seats in the saddle, and his horse could tell that he was not altogether himself.

A few miles of this sort of work had its effect upon the man. It began an involuntary will power, so to speak. It began to break the power of the drug. The very intention of reaching Kenton's ranch made him struggle with anything that might be hindering.

This was his time of greatest danger.

If he had come suddenly to his senses it might have worked him deadly harm.

Dandy swerved slightly, to give a chance to a horseman to go by. Dan Draper, in full retreat, came near running him down.

That woke Tom up a little more. His knees tightened, and he swung his shoulders slightly as he involuntarily sought to preserve his balance; yet what is called an involuntary movement has something of will power behind it. The gripe of his saddle became almost as firm as ever.

And then, when he came suddenly upon a little knot of men; heard, as in a dream, the cry of a woman, and a harsh order to halt, followed by a shot and a whistling bullet; if he was not himself he acted as though he was, which amounted almost to the same thing.

He flung up his hands, and without other warning or answer, fired two shots at as many horsemen, and then sprung to the ground and dashed toward the spot where he had located the cry.

When at the noon halt he had his encounter with the two outlaws, he had been chary of shooting to kill; but the odds were greater, here, the time was different, and the affray

more sudden. He shot as close as he knew how.

Of course there was a pretty large element of chance in work under such circumstances, for Dandy had not ceased motion when his master's fingers tightened on the triggers. If he had missed altogether, it would have been no strange thing for any one save Tip-top Tom.

So, if he did not kill, it was not from want of intention, for both shots were aimed where they would probably do the most good.

Only a sudden change in speed of his own horse saved the one man, and an unexpected movement the other.

They were both hit, to be sure; but neither shot was a fatal one, nor caused more than an ugly wound.

But it put two men out of the fight for a moment; and at the end of that the fight was over. The assailants were running or riding away; and Reid was lifting Miss Nellie from the ground, anxiously asking her whether she was hurt.

Miss Neville was hurt; but it was rather more in mind than in body. She turned on him savagely—for her.

"Ah, you are here at last. If you had not forgotten your word all that danger might have been spared."

Tom heard, but hardly understood.

He was wide enough awake now, but there was a haziness about the position that was absolutely distressing. No man could make a journey in his sleep without being very much abroad when he woke.

"Really, I do not know how to answer you. Where are we, and what has happened? I begin to think I must have been hit myself, though, I swear, I can't feel a wound."

He stared around, and could at least tell they were out on a trail. He looked for the moon, and saw it was not very high up in the heavens.

Something in his manner impressed Nellie. It never struck her he might have been drinking.

"Pardon me! I was wild—was excited. I did not mean what I said. What claim have I on your services, anyhow? Oh, I hope you are not harmed. I have been touched myself, but it is nothing. The parting salute of one of the rascals."

She held up her arm, and by the moonlight he could see a little red streak on it, near the elbow. He advanced swiftly, his handkerchief in his hand.

"Allow me to bind it up; and you had better test my flask again. You may feel sick after it, and you want all your strength. It will not do to linger here. Those villains may return, and we want no more chance bullets in your direction. But tell me, first, where are we? I really have no idea."

"Half a dozen miles on the way to the ranch."

As she spoke she held up her arm again, and allowed him to bandage it.

"Then you must have started long enough before moonrise. But—no matter. We must be getting on. Where is your mustang?"

The mustang had disappeared along with the outlaws. There was no use to hunt for him. Without hesitation Reid placed her on Dandy, and started on foot himself. He listened to her expostulations, but made no answer. There was something strange about the night's work that required thinking over, and Tom Reid was thinking.

As he strode along Miss Nellie decided he was angered—and not without cause. She had no apologies she cared to make, and so kept silent also.

A savage baying of hounds was their first intimation that they were nearing the ranch.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ONE THING WANTED.

TOM turned his right ear in the direction of the sound, while with the other he listened to what Miss Nellie had to say.

"Dear me! They told us nothing about dogs. And these seem very savage. Perhaps you had better remain here and let me go on. They will hardly attack me as long as I am on horseback."

"Dandy is a very accommodating animal, but he might object, both on his account and mine. I suspect there would be more danger that way than for me to keep by your side. Ride on boldly, and there will not be a particle of danger for either of us."

Before answering, Tom had assured himself that they were hounds they heard.

There are dogs; and there are other dogs, with entirely different habits and dispositions. Satisfied on this point, he continued to stride straight ahead; and before they had gone very far they saw the outline of the long, low, rambling structure they knew to be Kenton's ranch.

From their position on the trail it would not have been hard to make some one—if the building was inhabited—hear them; but Reid preferred keeping silent for the present.

The whole pack of hounds, eight or ten at least, came tearing toward them, mouths wide open, and throats giving utterance to the most terrific yelps.

Perhaps, if there had been any hesitation or fear shown they might have kept on, and made things unpleasant; but Reid met them cordially, and without fear. Somehow, it struck him their business was rather to warn than in the house, than to attack any one who might come along on the outside.

At first, there was some hesitation about allowing him to proceed; but in the end the whole pack spread around the two visitors, and with manifestations of a friendly spirit escorted them toward the house.

The distance to go was not over a dozen rods, and half of these had been covered when, from the side of the dark and silent house, there was a little spot of flame, followed by the whip-like crack of a rifle.

The gun was certainly aimed in their direction, for both heard the "hist" of the bullet, as it passed directly over their heads. Tom laid his hand on Dandy's rein as he shouted:

"Steady there, you idiot! What do you mean by such conduct as those? Try that again and there will be trouble in the air. Here is a visitor for Mr. Kenton. It is important that she see him at once—it is a young lady."

"Vamos! Go away! There can be no one come here at this time of night. A mercy it is the hounds have not already torn you. Come to-morrow!"

If Herbert Kenton was an American, as Reid had heard, then this voice did not belong to him, for the tones were those of a foreigner—probably a Mexican.

"Drop that, old man!" shouted back the Sport.

"You only think so. We are here now, and are going to stay till we see Kenton."

By this time he had located the position of the shooter, who was at a window near the center of the building. Without taking any careful aim Tom trained the muzzle of a revolver in that direction.

"Caramba! Have I not told thee he is not here? Since yesterday has he been gone, and when he will return I know not!"

The hounds sat around in a semicircle, listening to the conversation.

It was not exactly what they were used to, and they seemed undecided about their duty under the circumstances.

"But, I tell you, here is a young lady who has ridden sixty miles to-day, on purpose to see him, and that sort of thing won't go down with her. She is sure he is here; and does not intend to go away until she has seen him."

"And I tell thee, he has gone elsewhere. Ec off before I open fire again."

"And if you do, won't I make the front of that ranch look like a skimmer? It is not very often I take a man's shot without an answer, as I did yours. Start that foolishness over again, and you won't be able to do much shooting, or anything else."

"But, believe me, it is the truth I tell. If Senor Kenton had been in the house he would have been up before this, to see what makes this racket at his door."

"That is so," muttered Reid, convinced by this bit of reasoning.

"What are we going to do about it, now?"

He turned inquiringly toward Nellie, who was mutely listening.

She did not at once answer.

When the conviction once came over her that the Mexican within the house was speaking the truth, and there was no chance for meeting Kenton that night, at least, and perhaps for many other nights, her feelings were too deep for utterance.

Reid looked and waited.

He could see the disappointment was a more than ordinary one, and not understanding the circumstances of the case, hardly knew how to set about consoling her.

His question, then, only brought her more directly face to face with her position, and the knowledge that there was nothing she could do. Tom saw that himself.

"Oh, well, don't take it so hard. I don't know anything about why you want to see him; but it will all come right soon. It has got to. If you would give me an idea of what the trouble really is—for it would not be so important to see him to-night unless there was some trouble—I might see a way through."

"Oh, no! It was only a chance, at best; and now my only hope is gone!"

"Get another one, then. The world is full of them if you only stop to pick 'em up. And I'll help you the best I know how—and that's saying a good deal. I have begun to see you over the ripple, and you can just make up your mind I won't let go till I know you are in a safe harbor. The boys have a way of saying I am a sport to tie to; and before you are done with me you will be saying the boys are right."

"If I only could explain! But I have sworn to keep silent. Even to him I only dare explain enough to make him understand why it is that I must have ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars! Good glory! And here we have been fooling all this time away on a wild goose chase. I suppose you must have it right away?"

"At once—within the week, at least."

"That is a stunner—just now. I have seen the day when I had that much wealth on hand at one time, but it is not at this identical period. And the worst of it is, I do not see exactly how to raise it."

"Certainly not! You have sacrificed your time and comfort sufficiently, as it is. I could never have expected a perfect stranger to do as much. If I cannot get into the ranch—and it would never do to force my way in after the reception given us by yonder fellow—the only thing to do is to go back to the town and wait until Mr. Kenton returns. Surely, he cannot remain long away."

"Don't build too much on him. Then, if you can raise the sequins in some other way, you won't be a bit disappointed. He may be halfway across Mexico by this time. If I could get hold of that bear, so I could punch his head hard enough to suit the occasion, I have no doubt there could be enough got out of him to give you a fair idea of when he may be expected to return. As I can't we will do the next best thing. You sure you can stand the trip back to town?"

"I must stand it. This is no place to camp for the night."

"Don't you talk that way. If it did not seem important to keep the proprietor in a decent humor I would be mighty apt to have the gentleman from Mexico out of that and ourselves in before he had an idea of what was going to happen to him!"

"No, no! Do not think of such a thing! Indeed, I can go back. In fact, I will be all the better for the ride, tired though I am. It will be the best way to compose my thoughts, and come to a decision as to what is to be done in this unexpected check."

"Very well. Understand that I am at your service as long as you need me, and that if it is so important for you to negotiate a loan, why, ten thousand you shall have, if I stop the next treasure-coach that goes over the mountain."

He spoke with an air of cold determination, and yet it was after such a matter-of-fact way that Miss Nellie hardly saw anything out of the way in a perfect stranger offering her such an amount—when he got it.

And somehow he impressed her with the fact that he would get it, though from what he said it was possible he was almost as impetuous as herself. After the thing she had seen him do in the brief period of their acquaintance, his word would go for something, even if it did clash with the probabilities of the case.

At any rate, what he said kept her from utter despair, and she turned Dandy's head toward the Bend, and allowed Reid to stride along at her side, wondering to herself whether it would not be best to tell him the whole story and ask his advice. It might be there was some other way out of the difficulty, and ten thousand dollars was a great sum of money to pay.

"Nevertheless, I'll come back and thrash him within an inch of his life."

That was what Tom said aloud, after they had pursued their way for some little distance in silence. He had not thought of the words reaching his companion's ears; but they did, arousing her out of something like a reverie.

"Who? What? I do not think I understand you?" she asked, in some confusion, thinking he had addressed her, and that she had lost the opening part of his speech.

"It's not necessary you should, and I beg your pardon for speaking in riddles. I was thinking about our friend, the major-domo at the ranch, but it would have been more to the purpose if I had been sending my thoughts along to the other end of the line. Sammy Ward is just as much of a crank, if not more so, and I declare, I don't know what to do with you."

"Oh, do not trouble yourself about me. I can find a refuge somewhere."

"No doubt," responded Tom, dryly.

"But though the Giraffe is nothing extra it is about the only decent thing that has the name of a hotel in town. I am pretty much of a stranger there myself, but it didn't take me long to find out that much. And yet—why didn't I think of it before? I have an idea."

"So have I. There is a man on horseback in our rear, who appears to be following us."

"Yes, I know. Don't let that bother you. We passed him some time ago. He seems to want to see where we are going, and I am sure he is welcome to do so."

CHAPTER XVI.

MERRY MAY TRIES TO GROW CONFIDENTIAL.

MAJOR BURTON hardly knew in how much danger he had been. In fact, he supposed he had been able to escape observation altogether. He had come up with the two at the time the conversation with the Mexican at the ranch was going on, and had heard the whole of it.

Afterward, he skulked near enough to hear their discussion about returning to Silver Bend.

For a moment he did think of making himself known, and offering his own services, but gave up the idea before it was fully formed, and waited to follow the wake of the two.

He knew there was a risk, but was willing to accept the chances as they came, and would rather welcome an explosion.

It would simplify matters amazingly.

But no explosion came; and the two entered Silver Bend once more, just about the time Johnny Vincent's saloon was closing for the night. The game there had been rather slow, so Merry May laid down the box somewhat earlier than usual.

As she came out on the street she gave a glance around, in search of her husband, who was generally on hand for escort duty about closing time.

He was not to be seen; but some one else was.

Mr. Tom Reid, the Sport, who had been trudging along in the road, stepped up to the foot-way.

"Good evening, Mrs. Melrose! I am after a favor, and I don't know of any one I can ask with a better chance to get it done, than just yourself."

"Not too thick, if you please. I am only an ordinary mortal, and I don't know that I am working for the good of humanity, outside of the things that concern Merry May's interests. I can trust you not to say any nonsense, though, so you can fire ahead. When I know what's wanted it will be easier to make promises."

"Spoken like yourself. You remember, I suppose, that I met you at Brace Box, some time ago? Allow me to introduce to you a young lady in distress—Miss Nellie Neville. If you will you can help her out amazingly."

When Tom turned aside and halted, Dandy followed suit, so that Miss Neville was just at his back. She understood that Merry May was looking up at her, though it was hardly light enough to distinguish features.

"Glad to meet you, and happy to do anything I can for you," was the frank acknowledgment of the appeal. "I am not sure you will altogether approve of my style, but, such as it is on the surface you will find it clear through. There is nothing worse behind it. What can I do for you?"

Merry May had a pleasant voice, and a rather breezy manner. Miss Nellie was drawn to her on the spot, in spite of the note of warning. It was something to find a woman in Silver Bend who was willing to be her friend without question or hesitation.

"I suspect that you are the idea Mr. Reid spoke of a bit ago, but I cannot be positive of what it is he wants to say. Please listen to him first, and if he does not do justice to the occasion I will add my own little prayer."

"The fact is, Mrs. Vincent, the young lady is alone, and in trouble. I am willing to do what I can for her, but it will hardly do for me to work a change of heart in Sammy Ward through the medium of my revolvers; and there is no other place in town I know of where I would be willing to trust her. Can't you send Harry around to the Giraffe for the night, and take her in under your own vine and fig tree till we can talk matters over and see what is to be done?"

Merry May could see a feminine form on horseback, and that was about all. Miss Nellie had a sweet voice, but that went for little. A good many people have sweet voices, and yet are not exactly the sort one wants to domesticate.

"See here, Tom Reid, you are old enough to know what you are doing, and have the name of doing the right thing at the right time as often as most people. You know me, too. I hope that settles it. If I can be of any service to a lady I can always be commanded. I hope I will never have occasion to regret what was intended to be a kindly deed, because my regrets take such a practical shape they might cause a good deal of unpleasantness."

"I understand, exactly. And if you can not express your idea hard enough there is always Melrose behind you to help. It is a thoroughly square deal I am giving you; as you will find out when there is a chance to talk it over."

"Good enough, then. Bring the lady along. The accommodations are nothing to brag on, but they are better than she would find at any other place she could get into this time of night."

It was rather a queer idea, to think of placing a young lady like Miss Nellie in the care of Merry May; but Reid knew the latter to be a thoroughly honest little woman outside of her profession—and no one ever accused her of trying tricks at that. If he could have been sure about Miss Neville's feeling in regard to the association after finding out her hostess was Johnny Vincent's dealer he would have been more than content.

The two followed without hesitation, however, and found themselves at the Melrose cabin before many minutes. At the door they met Harry himself, who was just setting out to search for his spouse. He had been taking a nap at home, and overslept himself.

Merry May said a few words to him in an undertone, and he turned back, surprised, no doubt, but without a word of objection.

When Tom helped the young lady to dismount he made up his mind it was high time she had a place to rest, and swinging Dandy's bridle over his head, so that he would not be apt to wander,

he helped her into the house, where she sunk into a chair in a rather exhausted condition.

"Now then, young man," said Merry May, turning to her husband, "I suppose you know I am abundantly able to take care of myself, and this lady too, so there is no reason why your presence cannot be dispensed with at once. This gentleman is one Tom Reid. Make friends with him if you can, for he is a good one to tie to. Look after him a little when you feel strong enough, and don't dare to show your face here again till late breakfast time in the morning. Good-night!"

"Orders are orders," responded Melrose, dropping a kiss on the piquant little face that was put up suggestively near to his own.

Then he shook hands with the Sport, and the two left the house.

"Now, my dear," said Merry May, turning upon her guest, "something tells me you are in a peck of trouble, and want a confidential adviser. I have taken to you at first sight—something I don't often do—and if you want to return the compliment, I think I can do you more good than even Tom Reid—and that is saying a good deal."

"If I only dared!" sighed Miss Nellie.

"Humbly! What are you afraid of? Not of the Sport, Tom, surely?"

"Oh, no, no! He has been more than any friend I ever knew could have been to me, though I never met him before to-day. He knows little more about me than you do, though he has given up his own affairs, and fought for me, and—and—everything else that was grand and noble!"

"Yes, he can do those things, though he is hardly of your sort. Mind you, I don't want to force your confidence, but I can see at a glance you are in a position in which you have no business to be, and I want to get you out of it."

Nellie hardly knew whether to cry or be offended. This young lady was terribly straightforward, yet she told nothing more than the truth as it would seem to one not acquainted with the circumstances of the case.

"Indeed, you are mistaken," she said, at length. "I did not put myself in my present position. What I have been and will be doing has been for one who had the right to expect it all at my hands."

"I am afraid you hardly appreciate what you have been doing, then; and I speak entirely by guess, for until Tom spoke to me in your behalf, I had no idea of there being such a person in existence. If you can do nothing else, pray explain how you came to be under his protecting wing, in the first place."

Mrs. Melrose was persistent, and not without a reason. She divined very shrewdly that if she got the latter part of the story, there would most likely be a chance to work back from the known to the unknown, and get at the root of what she was certain was a mystery.

Nellie was tired; but she was in too excited a frame of mind to be sleepy. Unless she really became angered, there was nothing to do but to talk.

So she began at the point where Tom Reid appeared on the scene, and gave a brief but tolerably accurate account of what had followed.

Merry May followed her closely enough, without appearing to be more than ordinarily interested, asking no questions as long as Nellie would talk, but keeping up her side with an occasional ejaculation of wonder or approval.

"And so, this Mr. Kenton is the only friend you have in all this region, and he is not at home?"

With every indication of intense sympathy did Mrs. Melrose speak; but her brain was busy with another thought, so that she hardly noted the answer.

"You forget I now have you—and Mr. Reid. If they are not so wealthy I know more of their good intentions. Mr. Kenton can hardly yet be called a friend of mine. He belongs rather to the family, and I must see him the test before I can confidently claim him."

"It is a very large amount you intended asking him for?"

"To me it seems so, though perhaps that is because I am not used to the scale on which business is done in the West."

She spoke without remembering that though in her despair she had revealed the purpose of her mission to Reid, she had not as yet admitted it to Merry May.

"Ah, my dear, I think I see through the mystery; and have no doubt Tom Reid may suspect."

"Hush! If I dared tell you more I would, but, you see, I have promised."

"Exactly. You needn't say another word. That start of yours was enough. You have been in the hands of the outlaws, and have been turned loose to try and gather up ransom."

"And if you had hit the truth—mind you, I do not say you have—I am not right in taking every chance, however desperate, to reach the only man who might be of service to me in such a task?"

"Perhaps you are. So far, General Principles has always kept his hand on all he got, and got all he asked for. He is a sly fox, the

very slyest kind of a one, and when he calls for big money it is because he knows it is in the wood, and intends to have it. And yet, my dear, I am not so sure it would not be as well to trust to Silver Bend, as to Herbert Kenton."

"How? Do you know him?"

"As well as I want to, though I have not spoken a dozen words to him in my life except professionally. Perhaps not more than that in any way. I have seen him, though; and I don't like him. I would sooner run the risk and start a subscription paper in the Bend than trust to him when a pinch came. I have no money of my own to speak of—Harry has been sick and I have not had a remarkably good run of luck lately—but I am going to figure out how to help you anyway, and if you won't make a clean breast of it to me it just makes the matter so much the harder."

"A thousand thanks, though I really fail to see what you can do. And I know you will consider even your suspicious confidential, and keep them to yourself."

"Never you mind. Perhaps I will shoot the general; perhaps I will deputize Tom Reid to do it."

"Oh, no! That would be worst of all. Without him to hold his men in control there is no telling what would happen."

"There, there! That is enough. Who is it? Not your lover; and I don't think you have a husband."

"No, no! Do not torture me. It is neither. Respect my oath, as Mr. Reid did, and one day you will know all the truth."

"And that day may be one too late. I think I will let you go now. You are tired out, I see; and I fancy you can sleep at last. Tumble in, now, and I will consult with Tip-top Tom in the morning. If he should pump Patent Pete judiciously I wonder if he could not get a pointer or two. The men seemed to be friends anyhow."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RECEPTION OF A SPY.

THE major dropped off his horse as he entered the town, and followed the two from that time on foot.

He saw the conference between Tom and the faro-dealer, and watched them until they drew up at the Melrose cabin.

"By heavens! She seems to be able to pick out my foes. I wonder if she knows what she is doing, or whether she hits them off by instinct? Quite a little family tea-party in there. Wonder how it would be if I should intrude?"

The major was a man who seldom flinched or held back when he had once made up his mind, so that it is likely he was not in earnest when he raised his foot and took a step toward the closed door.

"The dainty little darling would give me a warmer reception than I am caring for," he thought.

"And I am inclined to think it would serve me right, unless I have a better excuse than I can see on the spur of the moment. Let's wait and see how long the conference keeps up. That ought to show the importance of their game."

He scowled darkly, as he looked toward the house, and then settled himself.

Fortunately, as it seemed, he did not have to wait very long.

Before he had got himself comfortably fixed, the door opened, and Tom Reid and Harry Melrose came out.

They appeared on the best of terms; but their conversation betokened anything but a secret. He managed to hear a few words of it—and smiled grimly.

Tom Reid was saying he never felt just so sleepy but once before, and that was in the early part of this same evening.

They steered straight to the Giraffe, and as far as the major knew went immediately to bed.

He departed in a thoughtful mood.

"The best plan would be the boldest, perhaps," he said to himself.

"I have been making a fool of myself by not adopting it in the first place. Strange how I should have had a premonition of something between us two which might bring us to swords' points."

"I gave him fair warning, at least, and if his hands cannot keep his head he ought not to be in such business."

"If I only was sure what business he really is in I would know better what to do. And after this drug nonsense—that failed as I did not dream it could fail—it will never do to ask questions of him. If the coup was only for to-night, or men here I could trust, I would see my way through the night a heap sight better. Ten-cent Jimmy did not get his name for nothing; and his pards are like to him. He knows too much already, and is not the kind of man to use in this part of the affair."

At that very moment he came face to face with the object of his thoughts, who was hurrying to the Giraffe. The hour was late, even for as late a bird as he, and during the evening luck had been against him.

"Ah, you have turned up at last, have you?" asked Burton, planting himself directly in front of the little sport.

"The next time you slip up on your work don't be afraid to say so. It may save your life."

"What sort of a bug is biting you now?" retorted Jimmy, who had been drinking enough to be valiant; and who had a hazy sort of an idea that the major was more or less in his power.

"I don't make slips, if you want to know it; and I guess I can steer as close to the truth as the next man. You don't want to crack your whip just so loud if you want to keep me in training. I'm a skittish sort of a colt, and if I should happen to kick over the traces there would be more than me hurt."

"Drop that, Jimmy. You can't bluff a man who knows you from the ground up, and there is no use to try it. If you had done as you said, the Sport would have been asleep till sunrise. Instead of that I saw him a minute ago, going into the Giraffe, wide enough awake to make it interesting if he knew of the game you are pretending to have played."

"An' who would he be making it interesting for?" asked Jimmy, with an impudent leer that was lost in the darkness.

"There might be more in turning State's evidence than there was in risking my neck. Maybe I better go to him now."

"Then you acknowledge you were lying when you said you had slipped the drug into his coffee?"

"Acknowledge nothin'. It was straight truth, sure enough. I guess it must have been the other way. The thing didn't work the way you said it would."

"And you still insist that you did your share?"

"I said it once, an' that ought to be enough. I didn't furnish the drug."

"There is something more than strange about it, though I am inclined now, to believe you."

"You better had if you want to use me any time again. If a fellow don't get credit for his work there is no use of doing it. What is it you want now?"

Jimmy had been drinking, and was perhaps wise in his own conceit; but at this moment the idea struck him that perhaps he had gone a little too far.

When the major answered, a little sternly, perhaps, but without the flaming anger he half expected to see, he was somewhat relieved.

"I want a sober tongue in your head, for the first thing; and then I want to know it is not going to run too freely. So far there has been no great damage done, but there is no telling where it will land you if it keeps on running the way it has been doing the last few minutes."

"Excuse me, boss. Perhaps I was a little off base, but I didn't mean it; and you know you can rely on me every day in the week. I have my bearings again, and I am not going to lose them, soon. If there is anything else on board for the night I'm right here, and you can trust me from the word go."

"That sounds better. Don't forget that you can talk as straight as any one. For a fellow who has killed a man or two in his time you don't always act with the caution I should expect to see."

"Hush, please. You know me from 'way-back, and I'll own up to it without speaking of some things on the street, that I'd just as soon not hear in a cellar. I would always sooner talk about what I am going to do than what I have done; and I don't care to say much about either."

"That's all right, so long as you do not force me to it with such frills as you have lately been thinking about putting on. You are rather a valuable man to shoot, and unfortunately you know it; but I am not sure I could not pick up a fellow who would do twice the work for the same money, so don't get too big for your boots."

"It's a bad plan to swap horses when you are crossing a stream. Better stick to the man you know you can trust. What have you got on hand for me? I'll just give you a sample of the finest work you ever saw, and that will put you in a good humor again."

"There is nothing much that you can do to-night. It is too late for work now, though if I had seen you half an hour ago I might have put you to some use. The party is back from Kenton's, and it might have paid to watch them."

"That's so; and I wonder you didn't do it. If I had only known I would have been on hand."

"I tried to do too much, and slipped up all around. I followed Reid to the Giraffe, a bit ago; but I left the woman at Harry Melrose's cabin, with Merry May. I would give a bit to know what they are talking of."

"I don't know that I hanker to snook around Harry Melrose's shanty; but if he is out of the way I guess it might be done without too much danger. If you would tell me what you are looking for, who the party is, and what she is

doing in company with the Sport, I might give you a better piece of work."

"Never mind all that. You would not undertake it if I were to tell you. I don't understand it myself, altogether. Do your own work, and let mine alone."

"All right, major. If you don't want to be confidential, don't. Scouting 'round the house of Merry May is no end of a dangerous job, and if I have to shoot the wrong party to get out of a fix, don't say I didn't give you fair warning. So-long! I'm off."

A cool sort of a rascal he was, anyhow. He went away without paying the least attention to the major, who attempted to recall him; and headed straight for the cabin where the two young ladies were still deep in their conversation.

"Reckon the boss has a fly in his ear," thought Jimmy to himself, as he cautiously approached the house.

"At his age he ought to look the other way when a likely-looking girl comes around. Then he wouldn't be so apt to care whether school kept or not. But whether he is off his nut or not, there is something in it for yours truly, and if I don't make wages out of it I'll want to know the reason why."

And Jimmy sagely shook his head, as much as to say it was not likely he would ever have to ask the question.

As he had said, it was not altogether safe to come prowling around the Melrose cottage.

Harry—sick or well—looked carefully after his preserves, and the lady of the house was known to be an expert in the use of a revolver.

It struck him he could tell of the importance of the conversation supposed to be going on within by the watch that was kept. If a man could come up to the house without notice it would be a pretty good sign there was little to be learned when he got there.

He did not intend to take large chances, though, and so wormed his way quietly along after he got within sight of the place.

By so doing he lost some time, and was at so much the greater distance from the cabin when he came face to face with a man who was coming away as cautiously as he was trying to go there.

The meeting was unexpected, and time for consideration but brief, yet he was certain there could be no mistake. He had a glimpse of someone somewhat disguised by a long cloak and with a mask over his face, who rose directly in front of him, and without hesitation or challenge aimed a blow full at his head.

Whatever might be said of his courage, Jimmy knew how to take care of himself in almost any kind of an emergency. Quickly as the stroke came his own movement was quicker, as he threw himself down at the very feet of the stranger; who, overreaching himself, stumbled against Jimmy's shoulders, and pitched headlong to the ground.

The cloak, which was excellent as a disguise, was not the thing for shoulder-titting, and was a decided bother when he caught at his revolver as he struggled to his feet.

Active as a cat, Jimmy was already up, and darting away; and the movement was taking him right toward the cabin.

The collision and its consequences had to be attended with some little noise; and rapidly as everything passed, attention had been attracted to the spot.

The window of the cabin flew open, and Merry May looked out on the scene.

"Not this way, Mister Man, if you please. Some other way. Fair warning. If you come closer I shoot."

She leaned out, as she spoke, and the weapon in her hand covered Jimmy, who was not too excited to understand. He dodged away from her revolver and so was just in time to escape a shot from the one belonging to the man in the cloak.

"More luck than judgment in that," he laughed, as he darted away; and the man in the mask giving him no further attention, strode off in an opposite direction.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHO IS GENERAL PRINCIPLES?

THE ride had not entirely shaken off the influence of the drug, for the moment Tom touched the pillow with his head he was fast asleep, rather to the surprise of Melrose, who had expected to get something like an explanation out of him. Harry obeyed orders without question, but he had as much curiosity as any one.

When he awoke in the morning Tom felt as though he had been dissipating the night before. His head was heavy, and there was a bad taste in his mouth. For the first time he suspected there had been an attempt at foul play; though why, and by whom, was more than he could imagine.

Melrose had been up for an hour, and Reid found himself alone at the breakfast table. As he was finishing a rather slender meal he saw a sly looking little face at the door, which he recognized as belonging to Handy Sim.

Sim smiled, winked, put his finger on his mouth, and beckoned mysteriously. Then, he went away.

In a minute or two Tom got up, and made his way toward the stables. It struck him that for the first time since he had owned Dandy the animal had been forgotten. He had no remembrance of getting him out of the stable the night before, or of taking him back, though he remembered now of throwing the reins over his head when he stopped at Melrose's door.

"If I had been drinking as much last night as the night before I would be swearing I was a 'tittle how-come-you-so. What the deuce does it mean?"

Handy Sim had a few words of explanation for him.

"Say, boss, I wor lookin' fur you last night; but somehow we jest couldn't connect. When Dandy come to ther stable all by his lonesome self, an' whinnied ter git in, I war sure s'uthin' hed happened; but I located yer in bed, an' then I war mixed w'uss ner ever. Bin waitin' fur you ter show up. Reekon you didn't git took in after all, though I was mighty much afeared it would happen."

"I seem to be here and all right, Simeon; but some things on the board have been puzzling me, and that's a fact. If you have anything to say speak it out."

"Jest this way, boss. I heard two men hevin' a confidential talk last night, an' one of 'em had it in fur you, big. He was wanting the other ter put some medicin' in yer coffee. When they dropped to the fact that I had bin list'nin' they mebbe give up ther idee; but I got away an' war dodgin' ther head-center all 'round ther outskirts ov the town fur more ner a hour afore I could give him ther slip. Guess he wouldn't 'a' da'st ter go furdur in ther thing knowin' I was up ter snuff, an' free footed."

"And why didn't you tell me this last night? I suspect you might have saved me some trouble, and yourself some danger."

"Got in his work after all, did he? Thought ef I kept ther boss thar Jimmy wouldn't move tell he got back, an' then it'd be too late. I tell yer, ther major keeps hisself quiet, but he are a bad man, with a big B."

"Seems to be, but so far, I guess, we have held him even," answered Tom, evincing no surprise, though the intelligence that it had been Burton who engineered the underhanded work was something of a shock.

"I suppose he did not let drop anything to show what I had been doing to start him on my trail?"

"Nary thing. I kinder guess ther lady are at ther bottom ov it, but mebbe you know better."

"Oh, I know nothing at all. Keep it all to yourself, though; and if the major gets you under the pump don't let on you have told me. If things keep going on like this you'll get an independent fortune out of me yet. That will do for the present. Perhaps I may want to see you later."

Tom was puzzled, and went away in a thinking mood. He was not sure but that the major knew more about the young lady than he did. If so, why had the gentleman kept the fact to himself? He had intended to make an early call on Miss Nellie, so this conversation did not send him to her any sooner than he would otherwise have gone; but it gave him something new to think, and perhaps to speak about.

The young lady was in rather better spirits than when he had last seen her; and greeted him after a friendly fashion. He could see that she and Merry May were on the best of terms, even if she had not entirely unbosomed herself to the fair dealer.

Of course, breakfast had been over for some time; and after a bit of conversation Mrs. Melrose suggested the two should go out for a constitutional while she cleared up the ranch.

That suited Reid well enough, and Miss Neville appeared to have no objections. There was not much of interest to see in Silver Bend, but there was plenty of fresh air and sunshine, which were more or less of a tonic to a person who was in such depressing circumstances, even, as the ones surrounding Miss Nellie.

"Much obliged to the little lady for her suggestion," began Tom, when they had strolled down the street for a short distance.

"Guess she suspected there might be something to talk about, and as she hadn't the time to take a hand in, sent us out where she wouldn't be tempted to chit."

"It has struck me perhaps I have been a little too previous. It has always been my way, though. When womankind comes my way, looking as though there was need of a champion, I am on hand. Could it be possible you have older friends about?—I won't say better, because, if I know myself as well as I think I do, that could not be possible."

"No, no! I am certain I am a stranger here, and if it had not been for your assistance, when I most needed it, I would have been desolate, indeed. Why do you ask?"

"Yankee fashion, I'll answer that question by asking another. Do you know anything of a gentleman by the name of Burton? Major Burton, they call him here; and I suspect with more

reason than goes with the most of the military titles we hear."

"The name is not familiar, and I have no remembrance of any person who might be the gentleman to whom you allude."

"Then, do you think there is any chance he might know something of you?"

"Scarcely. He would have been apt to make himself known, I should think—provided he is a man worth the knowing. By this time all Silver Bend must have heard something about me."

"Not that I am of much importance," she continued, laughing; "but it is not every day a young lady makes her appearance in such a manner as I did, last night; and I know how anything like a mystery becomes town talk."

"Well, you are right. There is no doubt in my mind about his having heard of you; and he has seen you, too. For some reason or other he was pretty well excited at the sight, and if I am not away off he objected to your going out to Kenton's in my company. I thought it would be well enough to let you know that much about him, so you could understand he was a man either to hunt up, or else to avoid. If he was a friend he is a foe; on that I will be willing to gamble."

"Not my friend, then; and if my enemy why is he such? It cannot be that he knows of my mission, and desires it should not succeed."

"An idea, for a thousand! There is one man I suspect knows what it is—you see I don't want to pry into your affairs, but an angel could not help doing a little guessing under the circumstances—and the major might be that man. You can't always, sometimes tell what a fellow means when he's not walking exactly in the middle of the road, and the major may have a deeper game than appears on the surface."

"Could it be so? If I thought there was such double dealing as that I would be willing to—to fight fire with fire, as the saying is."

"Well, of course, this is confidential, but the idea has suggested itself that Burton might be General Principles, himself. If he is—since the late go at the Express box, and the promiscuous amount of killing he has accomplished on that occasion, there has been a reward of just ten thousand offered for him. That is the sum you are wanting. Suppose I took him in out of the cold world and corralled the reward in your interest, how would that do?"

"I am not sure that it would do at all, as I told Mrs. Melrose, last night; but if you can show me any evidence of the truth of your suggestion I will take it into consideration."

"I reckon evidence will be a little short in a case of this kind. We would have to go on general principles ourselves. I am not much of a thief-taker myself, you understand, but at a pinch I can do 'most anything. If there is ten thousand in it for somebody who needs it, well and good. I wouldn't do it for myself, but for any one else I might be tempted."

Miss Nellie mused a moment or so. It began to look to her as though there had been some dealing, which she could not entirely understand.

It might be that the interference of Tip-top Tom, and his rescue of her from her two guides, had made General Principles change his mind. Either he was afraid she would betray him—though what she had to say that would do him any harm after the known affairs in which he had been engaged, and the hitherto unavailing efforts that had been made for his capture—was more than she could see.

It took her some little time to make up her mind; and meantime Reid strolled along at her side, and had the pleasure of examining her features, and watching the varying lights and shadows passing over handsome face.

He had made his proposition in good faith; but he had an object in bringing it up just now. She could hardly speak much about it without giving him some further enlightenment upon the matters of which she seemed otherwise determined not to talk. He was pursuing the same line as Merry May had done, and so far had met with about as much success as he had anticipated.

After a little Miss Nellie came to a decision.

"Of course, it is not my place to dictate to you what you should, or should not do. Perhaps, for the sake of the community, I should tell you to go ahead. After the attack made on me while on my way to Kenton's, I am suspicious of—well, of a party I need not speak to you about. You would certainly require more evidence that this major of whom you spoke was the outlaw before, you undertook his arrest?"

"I should smile. He is too solid a man with the town for an outsider like me to buck against unless I could show him red-banded, as it were. But I'll follow the trail that he took, and it wouldn't take me many hours to make up my mind."

"Try it, then. If you learn more, let me know. And if you know a man called Patent Pete, see if he cannot give you some information. Mrs. Melrose suggested he could if he would; and if there is any one who can make him talk, you are the man."

"Talk he shall, if Merry May says so. And I'll send a note out to Kenton's, telling him to

come in as soon as he gets back. That will save you trouble and risk. Meantime things will be running along as well as you could expect them. Keep up your courage. It will all come right."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN TOWN AGAIN, ALL DRESSED UP.

"It's one of the advantages of poverty when a man has a generous disposition," said Tip-top Tom to himself, with a laugh.

The day had passed without having learned anything of importance, or making further progress with the affairs of his *protegee*.

"If I had been wealthy I suppose I would have handed over the coin needed by the beauty in distress; she would have said thankee if she thought she had time, and then cantered off without stopping to say good-by."

"This way I have to make the ten thousand first, for this special occasion, and when I bring it to her in a basket, it will be just that much extra coin, that I have no other use for. If I never see it again, there is no loss, and if it ever comes back it will be an unexpected windfall."

"Just now, the problem is, how to make it. General Principles seems to be the best scheme; but there is no reason why I should not be looking out for any other little portion that may be raked in. It may be as well to have wealth enough to execute a graceful retreat if there is otherwise a failure all along the line. And meantime I may be keeping an eye open for Patent Pete. It is a little odd he has not been seen to-day at any of his usual lurking-places. He hardly has an idea I am looking for him."

"Unfortunately, for the present, Johnny Vincent's place is barred out. It wouldn't be quite the thing to be looking for the sinews of war, with Merry May on the other side of the table. Short cards it will have to be, and some place else for the scene of conflict. And I doubt if I can find a spot where I will get as fair a show. Which makes it all the more uncertain, but twice as interesting."

He was standing in front of the Giraffe while he went over this soliloquy, and when he came to its ending he was already in motion, heading straight for the Happy Home. Rough as was his reception the first time he had attempted to enter the place, he had seen nothing worse than he had struck hundreds of times when he subsequently visited it in his journey around the town under the chaperonage of the major. In fact, he rather took a fancy to see more of the proprietor, and this thought suddenly reverted to him.

The Home was in full blast when he reached the front of the building, and there was a constant stream of visitors going and coming, so that it would not be hard for him to make his way in without observation. In a place of the kind he suspected the Happy Home to be, he preferred to take a few notes before coming to the front.

He was stepping up to the door when some one touched him quietly on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, pard, but did you think 'ov goin' in thar? Because, if yer did I reckon I'd better go along with yer. Mebbe I'm all wrong, but I hev a kinder 'sneakin' noshun thet McGhee hez it in fur you, big ez a b'ar."

"Thanks, come right along. I'm going in, to be sure; and you can hook right onto my arm, and be telling me as we go along why you think so."

The man who gave the warning was no other than Patent Pete; and he accepted the invitation without a shade of hesitation. His arm was twisted into that of the Sport, and he caught step, and moved along with a military gait, eyes to the front, something after the style of a soldier escorting a man to the guard-house.

"Well?" said Reid, seeing there was no intention on the part of Potter to further explain.

"I think I had the pleasure of asking you a question, and if you are going to answer it you had better be hurrying it up. McGhee is not the sort of a man to be waiting long when he gets his eye on his game, and he will have me over the range before you begin to tell what it's all about."

"Hust! Speak lower, pard. This isn't the place ter be venturin' t'ings, an' I thart you war over ther kind ter take a red or good ez a wink."

"A sort of a blind horse, eh? Well, I confess I have been in the habit of going it pretty much blind, especially in a strange town, with new friends; but all the same a few words of explanation would come in mighty handy, and I have been looking all over town to find you. From what you have said I have an idea you know some things I wanted to be posted on."

"Ther less yer knows, pard, ther better it'll be fur yer 'hullsome. I'm with yer, an' that o'ter be enough ter show it's all right in ther long run."

Pete dropped his voice somewhat, for they were inside of the room, and somehow their entrance appeared to be immediately noted by a number of men.

The display of caution was not what Tom had expected from the Practical Plumber; but he

had no desire to push his questions if they were likely to give offense. Time enough for that after he had obtained the other information.

For the present, he had something else to look after, for he had not come to the Happy Home altogether to find Patent Pete though his presence might really be an advantage to him if there was anything like a plan to lay him off. Tom Reid knew there was no easier way to start a riot than over a game of cards, and no better place to catch a man napping, if the baldest kind of assassination was not intended.

"All right, then, Peter. We'll let it go at that; and if there are any mighty chiefs at short cards here you can point them out to me. If they can't be found this early in the evening, and there is a bank with a liberal capital and a decent flyer, I might be induced to take a few cases worth of chips and a share in the evening's amusement."

"Ef yer wanted ter shake a foot hwer it would be had enough; but ter take a hand in any leeble tin-horn game you kin find at ther Happy Home are jest rank suinside. Ef they tried ter mount yer at Johnny Vincent's what do yer think they'll be doin' hyer?"

"Having a heap of fun, no doubt. And I guess that's what you came tere for. If there is a game I guess we can afford to see the bottom of it."

"Then it's acause thar's more than the vally ov ther coin in it. Ef that's yer platform, go in an' win. Pete Potter'll stay close behind."

"Sure, an' there ain't quite ther gang at yer back that ther wor last night, but all ther same yez are both welcome. Av late, Pathyer is a sbranger, but he knows the run av ther place, av ye made onny want to show yez ther ropes, which Oi doubt. Make yerselves at home, an' av onny wan intherfares wid yez call on Larry McGhee, an' it's soon he'll settle thim straight."

Larry came gliding along, with his quick, cat-like step, and was at their shoulders before they were aware of his presence. It was a little hard to understand the exact meaning of his salutation, for there was a certain irony in his voice that he had only half succeeded in concealing by the time he came to the close of his remarks.

"Thanks, Larry," was the careless answer.

"I don't think any one will interfere with us in your shebang; and if I am mistaken I will not be apt to call for help very loudly. I am supposed to be of age, and a capable man. I want a chance to interview the chiefs of the deck around Silver Bend, and I thought this as good a place as any to find some of them. Can you give me any introductions?"

"Sure, an' there's a jontleman forinst ye that wad be able to give ye a lovely rustle, but ye have mit him alriddy, an' mebbe ye wadn't loike to say more av him. He's an owld fri'nd av moine, though Oi joost found him out."

Tom looked in the direction indicated by the nod of Larry's head, and was surprised to see the very man with whom he had the trouble at the saloon of Johnny Vincent, the night before. He did not allow any sign of his surprise to be visible, however, as he responded:

"If he has stamps he will do just as well as any other man. Introduce me, if you please, and I will do the talking."

The man was seated at a little table, on which his elbows rested, forming a support for his chin. He looked up with a suspicious start when the three halted in front of him.

"Misther Dumphy, allow me to make yez acquainted wanst more wid a jontleman by the name av Reid. He howlds a strong hand at draw, an' that wor what yez asked for."

"Ef it are business he's after, I'm his cucumber. Ef it's fun I haven't a word to say. I got enough last night."

"On, it is business every time," replied Tom, holding out his hand as readily as though they had never before met.

"Glad to know your name, Mr. Dumphy, and if your pocketbook corresponds to my ability the acquaintance will prove as profitable as agreeable. And so, draw is your vanity? I prefer it myself; and only tackle the tiger when there is nothing better on hand. My friend, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you will include him in the little, amicable controversy?"

"Seas'ly. One hand are ez much ez I can look after at a time, an' whar either kin jest about hold me level I don't keer ter tackle both."

Dumphy said this with a scowl, though whether it was intended for Tom Reid or his pard might be an open question. As the game had not yet begun neither took offense, even if it should serve as a warning of what might be expected later on.

Reid seated himself opposite to the man, and picked up the cards which McGhee brought, while Patent Pete threw himself down carelessly by the side of his pard. Without any more vocal sparring the battle was joined.

As a preliminary Tom threw down a dollar in the middle of the table, and this was as promptly covered by a ten from Dumphy's pocket.

"That's a straddle with about nine legs. If you are going to act the rusher so early in the game perhaps I had better draw out before I

begin. About three losing hands will break me all up."

Nevertheless he met the raise, and the game went on. To Reid's surprise the man introduced as Dumphy seemed inclined to crowd up the betting, and if he had not called him down in short order he would have had to be asking for a sight for his money. As has already been hinted, the Sport was not on a gambling excursion, and carried little more capital than he had considered necessary for the expenses of his journey.

Somewhat to Dumphy's disgust Reid held a winning hand, though he showed a full hand himself. The result equipped Tom for the campaign, and on the next deal he won again.

"Now then, my friend," thought Reid, as he drew in the second pot, "we are ready for you. I can afford to lose a small one; and after that you can keep on piling them up. I'm not afraid I'll go burst this evening, whatever may happen some other. I only wish I knew what is your object anyhow."

It seemed very much as though Dumphy had come into the game for a purpose; though a person not so well skilled as was Reid in understanding the inner motives might not have thought so. At all events, he was better provided with money than Tom had imagined; and lost it with a better grace than he had done at Johnny Vincent's.

If Tom Reid studied the face of his opponent with interest, Patent Pete actually devoured it as Dumphy reached out his hand to draw in a small pot which he had won without much of a struggle. Something had given the Practical Plumber a start, and no mistake.

Cautiously he nudged Reid with his knees, and then put on a wooden look which was enough of itself to put his friend on his guard when it was once noticed.

Unfortunately, Dumphy had eyes as sharp as those of the Sport, and if he did not actually see the movement he was wide enough awake to suspect what had happened even if he did not understand it. He pushed back his chair hastily, and in seeming wrath, while his hand dropped behind the board.

"Stranger, I don't want ter make yer howlin' mad, er ter feel lightin' bad; but ef yer mean ter say everything warn't all fair, squar' an' 'bove board, yer a liar frum 'wayback, an' it's Dumphy hisself what says it."

The words were roared out with a vigor that could not help but carry them across the room. They would have made almost any man feel like fight if said to him privately. Spoken publicly, to a man like Patent Pete, in the natural order of things there ought to be but one result. They were an invitation to an affair which could not be expected to pass without acceptance.

But Reid had taken in the meaning of his *vis-à-vis* before he had spoken half a dozen words, and by the time he was done his hand was on his revolver, that came out as if by clock-work.

"Go slow, Mister Man," he gritted. "What my pard says is bound to go, but I'm running this side of the table, and if there is any one to be called to book I am the man. You hear me shout?"

CHAPTER XX.

A BRILLIANT SCHEME.

REID was certain if there was any deliberate intention on the part of his opponent to get up a difficulty it was only to reach him, and he did not intend that Patent Pete should be drawn into it a bit further than was necessary.

This man had his weapons ready, but Reid already held the drop when he spoke. He thought it was the safest course to take, but he did not reckon on his surroundings.

If Dumphy did not answer some one else answered for him. There was a sharp report from near by, and Tom felt the pistol in his hand flung to one side as a ball struck the barrel.

At the same time Dumphy sprang to his feet, and in turn covered his men. If he had pulled trigger on the instant it is more than likely he would have dropped them both.

He lingered on his aim, however; and for that he had a reason. Some men immediately in the rear of the Sport were tumbling out of range as rapidly as they knew how. A bullet that would have dropped Reid would have been apt to make bad work with some of them.

And while he lingered he lost his chance. Some one—and no one saw who it was—tossed a chair up over the heads of the nearest of the crowd, and it lit squarely on the head of the man with the drop.

Patent Pete had been cool as the coolest from the moment he saw what was coming. While Reid held the drop he remained quiet, and when the other man turned a pistol on him he did not flinch.

Now, the time for him to act had come, and with the bound of a panther he sprang at Dumphy, and seized him by the throat.

"Han's off, all!" he shouted.

"He's my meat!"

Then the two rolled over on the floor together, engaged in a deadly struggle.

Just what the result would have been is hard to predict.

Tip-top Tom was uninjured by the bullet which turned his revolver aside, and he had already filled his other hand with another weapon; while Potter, gaining an advantage by the suddenness of his attack, and a deadly grip on the throat he was clasp.

So far the advantage was with the two pards; but there were more to hear from.

The two were alone against the crowd, and the crowd was coming with a vengeance. It certainly looked as though the leaders of it at least had been prepared for what was to happen, and were going to make the most of their opportunities.

In the midst of it all the lights went out.

How done, or by whom, no one knew, but the place was involved in darkness.

At that Tom leaped lightly forward until he stood at the side of his friend.

"Let him go this time," he whispered, though he was not certain the words would not reach other ears than those they were intended for.

"I don't want to kill a man unless I have to, and it would be just as bad if you sent him over the range. According to my hand it's time to be moving."

"Move it is, then."

Patent Pete had not been idle, and Dumphy was already lying under him, and making no further efforts. He lingered long enough to jab his fists viciously down at the spot where he thought the face of his foe should be found.

"This way, and ef any one trys ter stop yer let him have it, solid. This ain't fun fur nothin', an' ther crowd are all ag'in' us."

It was not an easy task to make their way out of the room without giving the clue to the crowd that was savagely snarling around them, and they might not have been able to do it had it not been for the fact that the movement was a surprise. Patent Pete was well known, and noted for his staying qualities, while, from what had been seen of him already, it was not supposed that Tom Reid would run away. They looked for the two in the wrong direction.

A moment later and they were on the street together, holding their weaponed hands ready as they looked back toward the door of the Happy Home.

But the expected crowd did not come pouring out, and the two strolled leisurely away.

"Kind of a sell on them, don't you think?" asked Tom, thrusting his hand into his pocket to make sure there was no mistake.

"All that trouble and expense, and the thing didn't work after all. I'll stand the rifle every day in the year for a hundred in, and no trouble in jumping the game when the luck begins to run the other way."

"Luck, thunder! It war all pure science. What I want to know now is, what are it all about?"

"It don't take a Philadelphia lawyer to reason it out. Mr. Dumphy, if that is his name, has got it in for me large as life. It can hardly be for what happened at Johnny's, for he was twice as vicious there. If I am not away off, the old fellow is not what he seems. Strip the mask off and who do you reckon you would see?"

"Can't prove it by me, pard. An' it ain't wuth while spendin' time tryin' ter make out whose toes you bin a-steppin' on. Reckon thar's too many ov sich."

"Guess he's hardly one of the major's best men. That chap looks as though if he had anything to say he would come himself. And if he is General Principles—the major, I mean—he has something else to think of, one would say, than laying out for Tip-top Tom."

"Oh, see here, you are away off on that," responded Potter.

"No General Principles in either ov 'em. I'm ther great 'riginal myself, an' I ort ter know who's took up my mantle."

"You were, were you? I swear, you tell of it cool enough. Perhaps you are the man who cut the throat of the Express messenger, and has a reward of ten-thousand hanging over his head?"

"Not much! I never did sich botch-work ez that. I cleaned 'em all up ez they came, an' then sent 'em on their waw, rejoicin'. Honor bright, no! This are all confidential. Fur why did yer think ther gen'ral war after yer scalp?"

"For two reasons. I fancy I rather beated him when he called on me to throw up my hands; and in another little matter he may think I have undertaken to interfere. Oh, I have not a bit of doubt that the man, whoever he is, wants me out of the way badly enough to take some risks in trying to get me out. And that was what I was wanting to see you about, to-day, when I couldn't find you. Some one gave me a hint you might be able to post me about the outlaws; though, if you belong, I suppose it is hardly the square thing to be asking you to reveal the secrets of the gang."

"Make it a little diff'rent, pard. Sav, ef I b'longed. I ain't in ther ring no more. Kinder strange yer heard ther facks. I war pardoned fur everything up ter date, an' then turned over a new leaf. Oh, I'm livin' on a chalk line, so ter speak, an' don't mean ter kick over ther traces ag'in unless I hev to—not in that line, anyhow."

"And I suppose you resigned your captaincy in all due form, and the rest of the gang became respectable along with you?"

Tom looked at his friend curiously. He had reason to believe that what he had so far heard was the truth. Though surprised he did not doubt.

"I can't say that much. I stepped down an' out, an' ther boys seemed right sorry ter see me goin' back ter ther cold, onfeeling world; but they didn't one of 'em go along with me."

"And you know nothing about who was your successor, and where are his present haire?"

"Heaps do I know about them things, but I ain't sure about ther head center. A gent by ther name ov Leach took charge when I resigned, but I don't know ef he's a-havin' yit. Any rate, this man back ther are him."

"No. Well, he had it in for you as well as for me, and if they are going to come back on you after that fashion I think if I was you I'd find a means to even up some way."

"Not on ther boys, boss; not on ther boys. They ain't never went back on me once, an' tell they does I ain't riddy ter play 'em dirt."

"But, ef I could be sure, right down, dead sure ther ther onworthy man az ez wearin' my shoes war tryin' ter send me out ov ther cold I'd be willin' ter deal a pard a hand from onder ther deck what might rake ary sized pot be war playin' fur."

"Now you are shouting, Peter. I don't want to have anything to do with 'the boys,' who are no doubt very worthy fellows; but with the general-in-chief, the man who did the throat-cutting, and all that, I would like a word or two of conversation in a corner where I had the dead medicine on him. I think, if I pinched him hard enough he would wilt, and that's a fact."

"I ain't sayin' yes, and I ain't sayin' no ter that, yit a while, tell I knows furler. An' yit, suthin' strikes me that you're on ther right level. Ther major cain't be in with ther gang, onless—yes—I don't remember ever seein' ther two tergeth'er. Yer see, ther are another man ez I spotted some time ago, an' p'raps ther major are him too. Ef so he's kep' hisself mighty distinct."

"What a boomin' s'prise it would be ef it should come out ther Burton was Principles himself?"

Pete was talking more to himself than to Reid, and the latter could see that he was almost under conviction. Of course he did not know much about the affairs of Mr. Potter, but from what little he had lately seen and heard he could guess a good deal. An idea struck him.

"There was some foolishness between you and Ten-cent Jimmy, was there not?"

"Jest a leetle. He war off his base, an' piled it on a leetle thick, tell he got himself wound up whar he hed ter show a fightin' hand er throw up his keards an' sherry out ov ther ranch. Guess that's all blowed over now. I give him a show lass' night, an' I reckon, sence he's shown his sand he'll quit."

"And it strikes me that I have heard somewhere that Ten-cent Jimmy is Major Burton's man?"

"Kayrect—with a large sized K. Sing'lar I didn't think ov it afore. But I tho't that might be about suthin' else. Mebbe you're right, after all, but I can't see it yit."

"Neither can I; and that is why I wanted to have a talk with you. Thought you might help to open my eyes."

"Blame it all! Fur all I know you might be General Principles hisself, jest a-pumpin' me. Ef ther two men I got in me mind fur ther chief war set on eend, an' you war put betwixt 'em, all with masks on, I'd like ter know who could tell t'other from which? Y'er' all ov a bigness, an' both ov a size."

"Now you have hit an'idea. Honor bright, Peter! I don't mean the gaag any harm, but I have it in for ther chief. Both of us can't stay in this section, and if I leave, it looks as though the chances are he'll finish up by making you an angel. Give me the points on the spot and we'll put both of your men in hock, and then I'll play General Principles a while myself. It may save ten-thousand dollars."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRST STEP.

"SEE hyer! You ain't a man-hunter, be you, tryin' ter draw ther wool over Patent Pete's eyes? Ef you be you sold me wu'ss than I war ever sold yit, an' I guess it would be a duty ter git even right off ther han'le."

The movement he made as he spoke would have done credit to Tom Reid himself. And he spoke with such a savage earnestness, as he deftly turned up the muzzle of his most convenient revolver, that Reid might be expected to meet it with a movement in kind.

Instead he threw up both hands, laughingly.

"Oh, quit! If I am not wide off you are a man who makes no mistakes, and you know you froze onto me at first sight. I am only Tom Reid, card-sharp and vagabond in general, ready to take a hand in a mining venture, or run a town boom, but hardly the sort of kettle to be

calling the pot black. This is just once in a way, and if I am not mistaken there are two women in the case. I'll swear to one; and I mean to show her over the riddle."

"Ef I warn't sure you war tellin' ther truth—ef I didn't feel it down in me bones—I'd pull trigger, an' you wouldn't be worryin' 'bout ripples, weemin' er anythin' else," growled Potter, dropping the muzzle as rapidly as he raised it.

"But I tho't I couldn't 'a' bin mistaken. No reg'lar 'tective could 'a' faced a shooter with Patent Pete behind it 'bout showin' his true colors. I'll 'polygize, an' now we're ready ter talk ther matter over. Ef ther are a woman in ther case that makes a diff'rens. Give us ther p'int, an' mebbe I kin see a way ter help her out."

"That is just what I can't do, because, so far, it has been pretty much guess-work, but I may as well open out what I have to go on, and then you can see how the land lays."

Patent Pete was scarcely the man Miss Nellie would have chosen as a confidant, but Tom Reid thought he knew what he was about.

Without hesitation he went over what had happened from the time he had stumbled upon the two outlaws conveying the young lady toward Silver Bend.

He did not forget to mention the little affair of his own with the masked outlaws before he reached the town, though he brought that in afterward, and as a second thought.

"I reckon you hev it all down fine," said Pete thoughtfully, after hearing what Reid had to tell him.

"Thar's some'un back in ther bushes, ther ther boss are holdin', an' it must be some'un mighty near ter ther gal er she wouldn't be willin' ter run ther reeks, an' try ter git ary sich outlandish sum. Your plan ain't sich a bad one, considerin'; but ef it didn't work you'd hev ter cut loose, an' then; some ov ther boys would git hurt."

"That's a fact, but it's the best I can see. You know about what good it would do to get all Silver Bend out on the war-path. There would be two or three of the general's men in the outfit, and they would flash points, and we might chase till we got as old as Methusaleh without getting any nearer."

"An' ef you tried yer game on 'em, an' it did work, thar would be harm done; an' ef it didn't it wouldn't be wuss than ef you went at 'em with a long pole. Say, now: ef you mean it all, I don't see how they could blame me; an' ef they did I don't know ther it makes a cussel bit of diff'ren's ary how. I'm with you, and here's my hand on it."

In a fit of mild enthusiasm Pete flung out his hand, which was at once clasped by the Sport. Tom Reid knew there was no better way to bind the bargain, and seized the chance the moment he saw it.

At first glimpse the scheme, so far as it had been outlined, looked somewhat desperate, but Pete knew better even than his newly-made friend the chances for its success, and soon, in a quieter tone, went on to explain them. He could give Reid directions by which he might readily find the retreat at which he had reason to believe the prisoner was held; and with other knowledge that he would impart, the deception might be carried out, at least far enough to enable Tom to gain a knowledge of how the land really lay, and perfect a scheme which would work.

Of course, it all depended upon the absence of General Principles.

It would be more than awkward to find him at home and in command; but Tom had so far impressed his views on the ex-chief that Potter began to believe he was within the purlieus of Silver Bend.

If it was the man at the Happy Home who filled his cast-off shoes, Pete had an idea he would not be in condition to move out of town for a while; and if Dumphy was only an agent, the principal was no doubt somewhere near, and waiting to hear the news.

The scheme was none too well digested; but it was carried into immediate execution.

Without even a parting word with Miss Neville, or a message to her guardian, Merry May, Tip-top Tom swung out of Silver Bend, at a rattling rate, mounted on a mustang furnished him by Patent Pete.

He would sooner have trusted to Danly had it not been for the fear that he might be recognized.

A good part of the way was familiar. With haste as an object, man and steed got over the ground at double the rate made on the previous journey, so that the spot where the controversy with the outlaws had taken place was passed before daylight, and when the sun rose Tom was well beyond, and involved in a gloomy defile of the mountains.

If Patent Pete had told a straight story, and there had been no changes since the Practical Plumber went out of business, he could soon expect to find traces of the outlaws, and though he kept his horse up to the steady gait at which he had been traveling, the Sport was not for an instant off his guard.

He had donned the mask which he expected

to wear during the adventure and made some other changes in his appearance, so that he looked quite the genuine article as he pushed forward toward the headquarters of the road-agents.

A sudden hail caused him to draw in his horse with a steady hand, though without the least appearance of surprise or fear.

There was no one visible, and the sound seemed to come from the wall of rocks on his right, yet he turned his face in the opposite direction.

"Steady, therel! Is that you, Numby?"

He spoke in a sharp, firm voice, yet taking on the tones, as well as he could remember them, of the masked horseman who had ordered him to throw up his hands. The name he mentioned was one given him by Patent Pete as that of the man likely to be on guard.

"Numby is in trouble—met with a leetle accident. It's Dick Ratchett holding the gate. The boys have been looking for you. We're a bit afraid ther might be trouble in the wind. You'll find them all on hand; but if you hadn't come to-day they were talking about sending some one in to see how the land lay. It looked a little odd not to hear anything. If the girl—"

"That is enough. Everything is all right; and if it hadn't been you ought to know me well enough to be sure you would have had word of it. Look after the horse. I may want him soon if I come back this way. Tell whoever relieves you to have him close and ready."

Tom had already swung himself from the saddle; and as he spoke he flung aside the reins, allowing the animal his freedom, while he advanced confidently toward the rocks on the opposite side of the trail from that on which the sentinel appeared to be located.

He was not positive he could hit at first trial the spot which Patent Pete had described to him, and it might be awkward if he did not.

He had not as yet caught a glimpse of the man who gave his name as Ratchett, nor did he expect to, for the present at least, but he was sure he was watching him, even though without suspicions. It would be nothing more than natural; and any hesitation on his part would be apt to call attention to the slight discrepancies of step and figure which Tom knew must exist.

The next thing after that would probably be a shot in the back. It required more nerve than a little to run the risk, for it was in the early stages of the game that Reid believed the danger would principally lie.

With the men once in front of him his hands would have to take care of his head; but until he knew better how the land lay there would always be the danger from the rear.

He had been particular to jot down in his memory every thing the Practical Plumber had told him in regard to the approaches to the lair, but chance must have aided him somewhat. One spot in the wall looked very much like another spot. Still, he walked directly to the one point where on close inspection he could find the landmarks by which he was to be guided.

The rocks here were covered with seams that seemed more like black marks than the gasches some of them really were.

In one of these, so well bidden that only knowledge or the merest chance would have enabled a man to find it, hung a stout rope.

Testing it Reid could see the upper end was fastened among the rocks some twenty feet above, and without hesitation he began the ascent, aiming to reach a spot which looked like a slight cavity of a few feet square, and reaching back no great distance.

For a practiced gymnast there was no great difficulty about the ascent, and with the knowledge there might be a Winchester barrel trained on his shoulders Tom made as good time as if he had been the Simon-pure General Principles. Before he had a chance to feel the strain on his arms he had reached the shelf at which he had been aiming, and in another instant was out of sight.

As viewed from below, appearances were deceiving.

The little nook was scarcely large enough to contain the body of a man, much less conceal it; but there was an opening in the floor which revealed a chute, inclining downward at an angle that made descent monstrous easy, though the coming back could be accomplished without much effort.

Everything was as Patent Pete had described it, and though the hole ended in darkness Tom did not hesitate.

First, he stuck his head into the opening, and called out. "General!"

Then he twisted his feet around and went scrambling down, making no more noise than was necessary, and only hoping there would be no suspicious sentinel below to receive him with open arms.

The distance he had to go to get out of his contracted quarters was not more than twenty-five or thirty feet, but it seemed a great deal more, for he encountered a turn or two, and the descent became more gradual as he proceeded. When his feet struck against what seemed to be a solid wall as he thrust them forward, he began to be afraid there was more here

than he had bargained for. Potter had told him nothing of this.

Quietly he exerted his strength, and afterward felt cautiously around; but found no way of outlet. The path was positively barred.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT, WORD FROM MY DAUGHTER?

"It won't do to crawl back again, that is certain," thought Tom, as he made his unwelcome discovery.

"There must be a way out of this, and if they should see I did not know it it would give me away at once.

"And if it should happen there are certain knocks and pass-words, to be given by the chief himself, and they should find me fooling around after a latchstring, that would give me away again. Not that I care a continental on my own account; but it would be mighty unpleasant for the other party, and Pete would be apt to go into a cat-fit over the fate of the poor boys."

Under such circumstances Tom was not likely to make more noise than was necessary.

The quarters were contracted, and his investigations were hampered for want of room; but he was able, by considerable squirming, to feel over the planking, and satisfy himself there was no bolt or latch on his side, and no arrangement for sliding back the panel. Not knowing what else to do he knocked gently on the planking.

If there was any one on the other side investigation would probably be made, and he could take his chances.

If no one came within a reasonable period of time he would feel at liberty to take more vigorous measures.

While he was waiting, scarcely expecting that any notice would be taken of his feeble summons, the door suddenly rolled back, and the way was clear before him.

If he had followed the dictates of his desires Tom would have gone forward with a pistol in his hand.

Thinking that would hardly be the way General Principles would come he simply gathered his wits well about him, and throwing his feet through the aperture he dropped lightly into the room in front of him.

He was more than surprised by what he saw.

In a general sort of way he had received a description of what he would find; and though there was something familiar about the scene there were features he certainly had not expected to see.

In the first place, there was an air of comfort about the place, caused by a furnishing such as Pete had said nothing about; but what surprised him most of all was the presence of a young lady.

She was not the prisoner for whom he was searching.

His first glance decided that, which was where the surprise came in. If this had been a prisoner upon whom he had intruded there would have been some show of either surprise or fear.

Instead, the young lady moved the lamp around upon the table in a natural sort of way, and looking beyond it, without showing emotion of any kind, quietly remarked:

"Ah, you have come at last. I began to think something had happened. What is the news from below? Has our fair friend succeeded in her mission?"

"About as well as she was expected to," responded Reid, cautiously.

Something about the tone of the young voice told him a secret, or he was much mistaken.

When Nellie Neville was started out in search of ten-thousand dollars it was not expected she would find it. Perhaps, if she should seem on the eve of success it had been intended to interfere. The attack on the way to Kenton's looked somewhat that way.

This young lady, then, must be in the confidence of General Principles, if not actually one of the active members of the band? Who was she?

Her presence there complicated matters a good deal, for Tom Reid would far sooner have faced half a dozen outlaws than one of the gentler sex. With the men he could be as distant, and as high and mighty as he chose, but just how intimate he should be with this fair little lady was a question that took a keen wit to figure out.

Nevertheless, though he was keeping a keen gaze fixed upon her through the eyelet-holes in his mask, he advanced without any hesitation, or evidence of surprise. Perhaps something she might say if left to herself would enlighten him still further. It was clear that so far she did not dream what sort of intruder he was.

It is needless to say that the young lady was Mira.

She was there by herself, and without her mask. At first Tom could make but little out of her features; but as he came nearer, so that they were no longer rendered indistinct by the glare of the lamp, he could distinguish them with more clearness.

The first thing he noted was their familiarity;

and the next, that they resembled those of Nellie Neville.

This young lady was older by some years, but it struck him the resemblance was too great to be entirely accidental. He almost uttered a whistle, as he thought to himself:

"If this isn't a family party I have struck! Thomas, it looks as though there was more in the wood than you have been dreaming of, and you better go mighty slow if you don't want to run against a snag. Who she is don't make so much difference, perhaps—what I would like to know is the name of the next move that ought to be made on the board. Blest if I can see my way! One lovely woman in the game makes it interesting; but two breaks it all up."

Fortunately for him, his entrance had been taken so as a matter of course that the young lady did not think it necessary to give more than the single greeting glance. Her position when he entered showed she at least had not opened the way for him, and he could not help thank his lucky stars that by chance he had hit upon a signal which would pass for the proper one, and at the same time show him there was some one on guard within hearing distance, even though invisible.

Miss Mira, however, was thinking of something else, and thinking hard, so that she did not notice the silence of her visitor, which otherwise might have seemed awkward.

"How long is this nonsense to last?" she asked, looking up at him once, though in an absent sort of way that would hardly have taken in any visible discrepancies.

It was a risky business to try to keep up anything of a conversation with this young lady, for it could hardly be possible to avoid giving a hint that would cause a scrutiny, and then a discovery. Any one else might have shrunk from the attempt—and so, perhaps, done the very thing he wished to avoid.

Reid answered after the same absent way.

"Until you or she tires of the game, I suspect. And I am not sure which will quit first."

"You know you have my word, and as long as you keep to your part of the agreement, I will not refuse to carry out mine, even though I may shrink a little from doing it. But it seems cruel, notwithstanding."

"The whole course of nature is cruel, my dear, and we can hardly be expected to be better than our Maker. How do matters stand anyhow?"

She shot a quick little glance at him, perhaps of suspicion, more likely of surprise.

"See for yourself. I do not care to be a witness of the interview."

She gave a wave of the hand, which the Sport was quick to interpret. There was a curtain in the direction her hand pointed, and perhaps it concealed a doorway. At any rate, he intended to take the risks of being wrong in his belief.

"Sleeping, now, perhaps?" he said, stepping forward till his hand rested on the curtain.

"Perhaps. All has been very quiet there for some time. She has even forgotten to weep. She might be gone for all I know. I am only guarding this side—and I am not altogether trustee to do that."

Tom gave a shrug of the shoulders, such as he had noted when Dumphy had played his game of flitcuffs and lost. Then he carefully pushed aside the curtain, and passed through the doorway, which, sure enough, was there.

So far his success had been wonderful—would the real trouble begin with the woman he was running all these risks to serve?

Or was there another woman at all?

The question was soon answered. He found himself in an apartment similar to the one he had first entered, and as he dropped the curtain behind him the other woman rose from a couch on which she had been reclining.

"At last! What is the news from my daughter? Has she succeeded in finding him?"

Tip-Top was more at home now, though caution was still as necessary as ever. Warmly as the lady greeted him it was not through any interest in the supposed outlaw chief, himself.

He drew back a trifle instead of advancing.

"Your daughter is well, and with friends, though she has not yet met Kenton, who is away from home. I have made inquiries and have not yet been able to learn when he will return, though it cannot be he will be much longer absent. Have you been treated with all due respect during my absence?"

"Yes, yes! Under the circumstances I have nothing of which I can complain. But tell me more of Nellie. Where is she now? Will she be safe? Oh, you cannot think of the grief her absence has given me."

"We can send for her, if you would rather have her here," was Reid's dry suggestion, for he did not want to have the lady grow hysterical.

That brought her to her senses.

"No, no! A thousand times, no. At least I can feel she is in safety. And surely, you could not be so inhuman as to keep us much longer separated."

"That will depend on circumstances, a good deal. If I was my own master I would not keep you here for another moment. As it is, unless I can find some means to circumvent those whom

I am supposed to command, I am afraid I can hold out no hopes of escape until the ten thousand is paid."

As an imitation of a man whom he was not certain he had ever seen, Tom Reid was certainly a success. Mrs. Neville no more suspected that General Principles was not before her than had Mira.

"Ah, but I have already told you how faint was the hope I could command any such amount. I am even uncertain about a much smaller sum unless I could be free to seek for it. Surely it was the mistake of a lifetime when you threw away your energies in capturing a poverty-stricken woman like me."

"I begin to think so, myself," answered Tom, moodily.

"Had it rested with me I can assure you you would never have been in this predicament. You do not understand how I am situated, and it will not do for me to attempt to explain. Perhaps, if I could be certain you would trust me I might attempt to do something for you, but I could not promise it would be a success."

"If I could only feel certain you are in earnest!"

"I can swear to you that I have all the will in the world to help you, though exactly how it is to be done I am as yet uncertain. Only trust me and I vow the attempt shall be made."

"I will trust you," answered Mrs. Neville, impulsively.

"What better can I do? You must see that outside of you and Mira I can have no confidence in anybody."

"Hum! I am not so sure about Mira, either," interrupted the Sport.

"If you trust me I think that will be enough. Mira is occasionally uncertain." And glancing back over his shoulder as he spoke he saw the young lady herself at his back.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BETTER BUILDER THAN HE KNEW.

GUARDEDLY as Tom Reid thought he had been speaking he was pretty sure Mira could be deceived no longer.

The young lady had resumed her mask before entering the presence of the prisoner, but her whole attitude was enough to show she was at length both startled and alarmed.

"Who are you?" was her question, and as she spoke she threw up her hand to take the drop upon the man who stood before her. Her muzzle certainly covered him, and if she had chosen to pull trigger he would have dropped.

"Don't be excited, little woman," was the answer of the Sport, as he carelessly turned his body the more easily to face her.

"In the new order of things I am simply General Principles, working for the good of humanity—or as large a section of it as I think it convenient to serve."

"Away with such nonsense! At first I was deceived, but after you left me I began to think all was not as it should be, and I followed you to listen. I have heard your conversation with this lady, and that is enough."

"Enough as far as it has gone; but nothing in it to show there should not be more of it. I fail to catch the drift of your meaning."

"I mean to say you are an intruder who has no rights here, and as such you are liable to receive instant death. If I proceeded to execution there is no one here to offer an objection that would count."

"Excuse me! But that shows how little you know about the laws and regulations by which this commonwealth is conducted. The king is dead, long live the king! Several other General Principles have passed away, but the title and position remain. I am in the saddle now, and I guess it would be difficult to convince the boys to the contrary. If you don't believe me, call them in and see if you can stir them up to a sudden flood of mutiny. They understand the punishment as well as you do, and are not as careless about forcing the execution of the penalty."

"Good heavens, do you mean to tell me?"

She ceased speaking suddenly, but she had said enough to give Tom his cue. At first he had been speaking to gain time, and perhaps had not chosen his words as well as he could have wished if he had had opportunity to consider their worth.

"I mean to tell you that the succession has fallen on the only man who would care to take some little risk to provide for your safety. The captain, I may as well explain, has met with one of these little accidents possible in our profession. He may be around again in a month—but meantime what would become of you? Perhaps I may be wrong, but I fancy he would feel more comfortable if he had you nearer to him, and that he has no particular interest at present in his prisoner."

"And to prove all this you intended to make arrangements to set her free, and abandon me to my fate? Thank you. I believe I can take care of both myself and her; and that we two would be safer if you were out of the road. I think I can satisfy the commonwealth in regard to my actions even if I should go so far as to shoot you where you stand."

"Yes. 'Most anything seems to satisfy the boys; but how you would fare afterwards is something I don't care to contemplate. It would make a chance for another promotion, but the next captain might not be as mild a mannered fellow as I am. Have it to suit yourself, however. If you really want to send me over the range, blow away. I am not sure I am not tired of this sort of thing, anyhow."

"Have done with this nonsense! Unmask yourself, and let me see who you are. It may be you are as much a stranger to them as to me. And remember, my finger can pull a trigger as well as a stronger one; and the result will be just as deadly. Hands up, sir, and consider yourself as my prisoner!"

"Sorry I can't do the half dozen things you require all at once. Best way out, I guess, is to do none of them and see what comes next. If the late General Principles expires through want of the tender hand of woman at his bedside the regrets will not be mine, even if you leave me time to experience them."

Mrs. Neville was listening to this conversation with wide open eyes.

Even when he so frankly admitted it she could hardly believe Reid was not the man who had taken her captive, and it was only at the last order of Mira that she was fully satisfied this was not all a bit of by-play for some purpose as yet hidden from her. She had been edging nearer to the girl in the mask, as being the less a stranger, but the words of the Sport were having an effect upon her, however little they seemed to accomplish with the young lady to whom they were addressed.

With a sudden boldness hardly to be expected from one who had hitherto shown such a lamb-like disposition, she darted forward, throwing up the wrist of her feminine guardian as she came.

"Wait, wait!" she exclaimed.

"Can you not see the truth of what he says? Your father had the manners of a gentleman, whatever may have been his faults; and I doubt if he was capable of the coarser crimes. But the men under him—what are they? Oh, if these things we have just heard are true we are in danger—you no less than myself."

She was certainly in earnest; but she ran some risk in showing it. Between the two, if it came to the use of firearms, there was a likelihood of stray metal reaching her, and she had no means of knowing how accurately these two could place their shots.

It was instinct made Tom Reid twist his own weapons out the instant the drop was no longer on him; but he went no further in his offensive operations.

Instead, he reversed the revolvers in his hands, and held them out toward Mira, not with the intention of surrendering them by any means, but to show how he might have done had he been so minded.

"Our elder friend is correct, as no doubt she usually is," he said, laughingly.

"But I assure you I have no intention of taking advantage of her earnestness, though you can see what I might have been doing while she had your muzzles turned the other way. Take the old position, if you please, and let us continue to reason the matter together as we were doing before. What was it you were going to say to those last remarks of mine?"

"I forget now," answered Mira, not attempting to recover the drop, although she had abundant opportunity had she so chosen.

"Probably it was nothing of importance. Possibly I have changed my mind about it anyhow, as a woman has the right to. If you have plans for the future which you think would be for my advantage you may mention them. I am willing to listen."

"And then, what are you going to do about them? It strikes me there has got to be a little better understanding on both sides before much can be said about what is to be done for you and the lady here under your charge."

"That is just it. If I know who you are, and how much of truth there is in what you have been saying, I will understand better what answer to give. I am not sure I would not be the better pleased if I could find a reasonable excuse for throwing up the hand I have been lately playing. It grows tiresome, this game does, if nothing else."

"Of one thing you may be sure—and I can swear to it by any oath you can suggest. I mean you no harm, and I would save this lady, and send her safely to her daughter."

"And then—"

The conversation came to a sudden pause.

A curtain opposite to the one through which Reid had entered was cautiously pushed back, and a head thrust through the opening.

"Whist, gin'ral dear. It's a hape av danger ye'r in, an' for yer loife don't say a loud worrud tell ye hears phat it is Oi have to till yez."

"Come in, Pandey; and by the same token you had better bring your irons with you. There is no telling what will be the dangers when you intrude on a little family tea-party like this. What is it you are trying to say?"

Mira appeared to be glad of the intrusion, but

while she spoke she watched sharply to see how the Sport would take it. If he was really the outsider she suspected it was more than likely he would attempt an aggressive movement at once; and for anything of the kind she had evidently prepared herself.

The Tip-top Sport was not at all charmed at the interruption; and yet, from the few words he heard, he was not altogether certain it was going to work to his disadvantage. In turn he watched the fellow closely as he entered the room.

He was masked like every one of the gang that he had as yet seen, and so far as outward appearance went there was not much difference between him and the previous specimens of the outlaws he had met, but the brogue gave his nationality away, and Reid had already formed some sort of a hazy notion of how the man would look if his disguise was stripped away.

"Steady, Pandey, as you are!"

The Irishman had advanced a pace or two into the room, and at the order, sharply given, halted with military exactness, and came to an attention.

"Quite correct, my friend, quite correct. Remain in that position until you have spoken your little say-so, and then look for further orders. What is it all about?"

"Sure, an' it's about yerself, gin'ral dear. The b'yes, badd'ness to thim, have it in phor yer badd. It wor muthin' an' bluddy murder they wor shpakin' av, an' so Oi towld thim, an' av Oi had not made moi esthchape it's little wad they have allowed me to till yez their intushun."

"So you thought it best to keep on the side of regularly constituted authority? In most cases it is—perhaps, even, in this. Let us hear the rest of the story. What do the 'b'yes' propose to do?"

"It wor along av the men at the 'ither stronghold. Sure, an' our b'yes wor quioet az lambs tell they had them all worrucked up. They say, sor, the big share has bin goin' to you, an' the little share to the min, too long, an' they wor going to even up. Av yez had gone there fourst they wor to kape ye tell yez wint over the books wid thim, an' wor made to disgorge. An' they say yez wor gittin' riddy to fool thim out av the sheer they wor expectin' from the luddy. An', altogether, they have made up their moinds that it are toime for a change, and they wor goin' to have it."

"Well, Pandey, I guess you have stated the case exactly, and much obliged am I to you for breaking the news so gently to this young lady, here. I had been trying to explain to her there was to be a new deal, but she was unwilling to believe."

"Saints an' angels!" exclaimed Pandey, taken aback by this cool address. "This toime Oi have done it, shure. It's not the gin'ral, at all, at all."

"There is where you are a little out. It is not the general you expected to find, but it is a very good article, nevertheless. The deal has been made, you understand, and I have been sent down by the rest of the band to take command of the boys."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CONFLICT OF AUTHORITY.

"SURE, an' it will be an azy toime yez will have av it, thin, phor a whoile," said Pandey, without showing he was in the least disconcerted by the sudden announcement.

"The b'yes wor lookin' phor a lay-off tell the question war settled av where their share av the plunther had gone. An' av they can get it, Oi'm thinkin' it will be wan sthupendhus spree they will be afther havin'. You're welcome az the flowers av May. An' phot has become av the r'ale gin'ral?"

"The real general as you call him didn't throw up his hands soon enough when he was asked to, and came as near going over the flume as a man could and stay on this side of it. Take care you don't follow in his footsteps."

"Sur, an' av the dade's done, an' all the b'yes aghreeable, phat roight has Pandey to question? Oi tuk me oath, an' Oi'm ane to kape it. Av the gin'ral is wanst out, an' you wanst in, that sittles it."

Pandey was not hard to convince, but there were probably a good many sharper wits in the gang than this blundering Irishman, and Tom was not certain how far it would be safe to follow the line he had drifted into.

He had taken the Irishman in hand in time to prevent any immediate alarm from him; and the intelligence just heard might prevent Mira from denouncing him, as he had been expecting her to do from the first, even if it did not make her his ally.

He thought it worth while to take a little longer risk.

"That is the true way to take it, and it will not go any the worse for you because you were faithful to your chief as long as he was the chief. I am going to put some confidence in you, and if it is not betrayed I can assure you it will be money in your pocket."

"It's the gowld we are all afther, an' av yez want a mon to toie to Pandey McMurtagh is yer bist howit."

"Exactly, and that is the reason I am going to trust you. I have come down here to take charge till your men all have a chance to come in and have their say. Then if you can put up a better man I am willing to go back to the ranks. But I want to find out whether everybody here is sound on the movement, and to do so it will be as well not to tell them how the land lays. They can find out for themselves, after a while, and meantime I can learn how they really feel. Go back and say nothing of what I have told you. If they think I am the man who has been in command—as you did till I told you differently—so much the better for my purpose."

"Oi am unther orders, an' yez can tbrust me to kape to the letther av thim."

"About face, then, and say nothing to the others until you have my permission."

Pandey executed another military salute, wheeled, and took his departure as silently as he had come.

"You see how it is, yourself," Reid said quietly, looking up at Mira.

"Under the present order of things your best plan is to submit as gracefully as possible. The men will recognize my authority; and it will be just as well they do not have their attention called too prominently to your presence. You have your pistols, and these apartments are sacred to your use. Shoot down the first man who attempts to intrude against your wishes."

"I begin to believe you are not altogether a fraud," was the thoughtful answer.

"I suppose we would not be allowed to retire in good order?"

"Hardly, although as yet I am not acquainted with the position of affairs as well as I would wish. It is certain we could not retreat the way I entered, for the sentinels who would be willing to let the general in would not be willing to let either the general or me out without some further explanations; and you must see you are in some sort involved in the fall of your father."

"I see that this new deal will make things a great deal worse for this lady than they would otherwise have been, unless you have more power and good will than I have been giving you credit for. If I were taking care of myself alone, I would have but little fear for the result; but as I have to look after the safety of Mrs. Neville, I have to move slower than I would otherwise do. Take your own course, sir; but beware! If harm comes to us through you, there will be a terrible reckoning for it at a not far distant day."

"All right," responded Tom, gayly.

"My only fear—when I came down were that I might have trouble in making you hear to reason. Now that I have you convinced, I can manage the rest. A few outlaws more or less makes little difference; but a young lady like yourself lost would be a life-long regret. You understand that while I am looking after the interests of the gang a great deal sharper than I think they know how, I am not going to allow it to harm a defenseless female, or put her to torture because she cannot raise a ransom beyond her means. That is as much solid sense as I usually say at one time. You can supply anything material I have left out. It is time I was interviewing the rest of my tiger-cats. Look out for yourself and your friend till I see you again."

With a parting nod, Tom coolly followed the course taken by the Irishman, and passed out of sight. He was uncertain what his next move would be, but as luck had stood him in stead thus far, he was in hopes it would stay by him till the end of the chapter.

It was well he remembered thoroughly the instructions he had received from Patent Pete.

The moment he dropped the curtain behind him, he was involved in utter darkness, and he would have been at a decided loss to know which way to turn.

But he stepped out boldly, counting as he went, and when he had taken ten paces, felt for the wall which should be in front of him.

The wall was there, or at least another curtain was, and when he had thrust this aside, he could see a glimmering of light beyond, which he thought came from the outside world.

A few moments more and he was out of the cavern which formed the true headquarters of the outlaws, and gazing down the valley beyond.

Pandey McMurtagh had evidently obeyed orders, and said nothing in regard to what he had seen and heard.

A dozen men were there, which gave him a better idea of the strength of the band than he had yet had.

Every face was masked, though the work in some cases was so carelessly done it could hardly have been a disguise with those who would recognize the features when uncovered.

The reason for this was what puzzled Tom.

It was not likely the men feared intrusion and recognition by outsiders so long as they kept watch on the inlets to their stronghold. And

certainly they might have a more comfortable time without the covering.

"It is just as well for my interest," mused the sport, as he lingered a moment, casting his eyes warily around him.

"I wouldn't be sure, but I suspect the real chief has an object in view that is beyond these fellows. Perhaps he is a man of note in the outside world, and don't care that even his pards shall see his face. If he has set up this arrangement for any such reason there must be some way of recognition at a glance, and outside of the passwords. If there is, I suspect there is where I am going to fail. Nevertheless, here goes."

He stepped forward without further hesitation, not even dropping his hands on his hips.

The men were gathered in a little group at a spot a dozens paces or so away, and though there was nothing else in their manner to indicate suspicion—or something worse—in their minds, Tom Reid noticed that every man had either his Winchester lying near, with the muzzle resting in his direction, or a revolver convenient for use.

Had it not been for the warning of McMurtagh he would have supposed his attempted cheat had been discovered.

If the Irishman, however, had not seen the men since the late interview, or if had held his peace, the present position of affairs was so much the better.

"Well?" said Tom, inquiringly, as he halted directly in front of the group.

"It ain't at all well," replied one of the men, looking up.

"We bin figgering it up lately, an' it looks as though there ought to be more money er less work. We've done ther work, though, an' now we want ther coin."

"Hum! That's as natural as they make it, and it's the way I have been talking myself. Do I understand all you men are in the same mind?"

Tom looked carelessly around as he asked the question. He did not intend to be caught altogether napping in case there should be any movement made.

"All but McMurtagh, an' he don't count. Numby had s'ublin' ter say, an' he said it so loud that he's on ther bed of sickness. We'd hate ter put you thar too, but unless you kin show a square balance I wouldn't wonder ef that was what it would come to."

"It gets more interesting than ever. Meantime, while I am making up the accounts, who is going to run things, and after what sort of a fashion? I may as well hear the whole truth while I am at it. Strikes me you have come back on a man that has done the clean thing by you for some time after a mighty sudden way."

"We ain't denyin' but what you run things after ther proper fashion—only, all ther time it's bin fur your own good. You say thar's stamps in ther treasury, an' that you hev some ov ther boys takin' care ov it, but we reckon you may have been tryin' ter pull ther wool over our eyes, an' tell it's divided up I guess you'll stay right hyer."

"An' ther ladies in thar," pointing toward the cavern, "will stay thar, too. Mebbe you could make it lively fur us boys, an' mebbe we could rake you in ther first pull; but whichever way it went we got them ter spec'kylate on. An' if the wu'st comes to ther wu'st ther man behind ther door 'll drop 'em. You can't reach him afore they will go under, all both. He's watchin' ov 'em now; and that's the platform tell this thing gets settled fur good an' all."

Quite an oration did the fellow make, and if Tom Reid had been the man for whom it was actually intended it no doubt would have troubled him a good deal, or else it would have made him shooting mad.

No signs of anger did the counterfeit General Principles manifest however.

He listened to the man until he was done, and then broke into a careless laugh, that had as much of good fellowship as of amusement in it.

"Well, pards, that's a noble platform, and I haven't a bit of objections to your standing on it till you can find something broader. I reckon you don't know who I am, though you ought to, and will very soon. For the present I represent General Principles—but not the general you have been taking me for."

"If you notice, my mask is a little different from the others; and I guess you know what that means."

Purposely he altered his tone somewhat, no longer trying to speak as though he was Mr. Dumphy under a mask, and talking like somebody else.

The shock was tremendous. The men sprung to their feet as if moved by an electric stroke. It was just as well they were conscious of their apparent strength, and not at all afraid of what might be done by one man. They might, otherwise, have opened fire at once.

"A stranger, by mighty!" exclaimed the man who had been doing the talking for all.

"Who are you? Speak up, quick, afore we don't think, but send yer up ther flume."

"Still the same good sense. I was afraid you might get yourselves in trouble first, and then apply for explanation—what was left of you. I have the pleasure of being the new General Principles, lately known to the world at large, and the other section of the boys, as Elegant Adam. We laid my predecessor on the shelf yesterday, and I have come on to explain the situation, and get your assistance in evening everything up."

"And who the thunder is Elegant Adam?"

"A comparatively new recruit, my friend, but by no means an inexperienced soldier. And if you have never heard of me in the past—which I am inclined to doubt when I consider the number of names I have flourished under—I am very sure you will know plenty of me in the future."

"Down him, boys! He's a bloody spy! Don't kill him till we have the truth twisted out of him; but down him hard!"

The speaker suddenly clubbed his rifle, and springing forward made a swinging blow at the head of the Sport.

CHAPTER XXV.

PATENT PETE'S PRIVATE INTELLIGENCE.

TOM-TOP TOM had not supposed he could get through the interview without an explosion, and he had been only anxious to know in what shape it was going to come.

He had seen from the first that the boys were wide awake, and on their guard. They had not expected the general to accept his suspension without a struggle, and as their captain had the reputation of shooting on small provocation they would not have waited an instant if firearms had once been produced.

This shape suited him as well as any—and perhaps best of all.

The stroke was not a tender one, and if it had landed would have given him a sore head for the balance of the day, if nothing worse.

But he moved so quickly, and yet so easily, the motion was scarcely to be seen; and the butt of the rifle went sweeping over his head, barely missing it.

The force of the blow swung the giver half-way around, and before there was any chance for recovery Tom had stepped in and caught him in a grip the like of which he had seldom if ever felt before.

Up into the air he went, as though moved by springs, and just as every one was expecting to see him fall with a sickening crash, Reid eased him down, and, with one hand twisted in the back of his collar, holding him up as a sort of shield, with his other hand thrust the muzzle of a revolver into the most convenient ear.

"Flag of truce, boys, until we get down to the rights of things. If that don't suit, tumble in the best you know how, and I'll see about taking care of myself until you are willing to listen to reason. Back, therel! The man who takes a step forward signs a death-warrant for our pard, here."

The Sport had a pretty strong suspicion he had hold of the man who had expected to succeed the chief in case he was ousted from the command.

If that was the case it was likely there were several other jealous aspirants who would not object to see him somewhat roughly handled so there was no blood drawn.

At all events, he was watching more closely than ever, with the idea that if there was to be a crisis it was close at hand, and that he had better be ready for it.

The man in his grasp was bewildered.

He might have stood the failure of his own effort, but what he could not understand was the way in which he got into his present predicament.

Of one thing he was sure. Any man who could handle him after such a style would be apt to understand how to pull a trigger; and have the nerve to do it. He remained perfectly motionless, as though paralyzed at the cold touch on his ear.

Tom had his men all in front of him. Some had caught up their Winchesters, while others had hands to their revolvers; but further than that no one went. They could hardly be taken at a more decided disadvantage; and before they began to shoot it might be as well to hear this party to the end.

"I see you understand the position," laughed the Sport, speaking to all parties concerned.

"I certainly hold one life here, and I think I could snuff out half a dozen before you could have me down. And it would all be for a mistake. That is the reason I am slow to begin; but I warn you that if we come to terms there must be no more of such nonsense. When you can't depend on your men you may as well begin by taking them out of the damp, first off."

"We don't understand, an' that's a fact," began one who had not as yet spoken.

"Thar's bin a good bit ov chin, an' we ain't on to ary thing, 'cept that you don't b'long to ther gang."

"There is where you are away off, my friends. I belong to the gang very much, and expect to still more so. I am the new boss; and expect to put things in better running order than you have yet seen."

"You do? Blamed ef it ain't singlar thet none ov us ever heard ov yer afore. I ain't denyin' thet you ain't got ther upper hand ov Sandy, thar; but you can't git away with all ov us; an' we better see how fur you kin git around than ter run ther reeks. You put yer hand up tell we draw yer teeth, an' then we kin talk it over comfortable like, an' ef it turns out we're ther mistaken ones you kin swing things ter suit yerself. Neither me ner Sandy 'll be doin' ary kickin'."

"That is your platform, but it isn't mine. They wanted to come down with me and have the thing all set up, but what was the use of it? If I can't get my men well in hand by myself, what sort of a chief would I make? answer that yourselves."

"Cordin' ter that we ain't got any say in ther matter at all."

"You put up your irons, and I'll put up mine and let go my grip on Sandy. After that it won't take more than a minute to explain, if you haven't got it through your heads yet."

"Flag ov truce it are, then; but don't yer furgit that at ther fu'st crooked move we kin gather 'em up ag'in, an' down yer, too quick."

Both sides were suspicious; but the proposition was accepted, with some reluctance, and Tip-top Tom had a chance to explain, though he was still far from seeing how he could do it plausibly.

"That's better," he said, dropping gracefully to the ground, and resting upon one elbow.

"Of course I had to talk a little sharp at the outset, to make you listen to reason, but that is not my average style at all, and you'll believe me when we have worked the roads awhile together. As we al have been understanding it, the big complaint is that the old general has been salting down all of his plunder, and the best part of ours. Ain't that what it amounts to?"

"Just about, party, an' we're going ter fix all that; but whar do you come in at?"

"As I was going to remark. We think we have spotted our man; and are in for an attack on the treasury just as soon as we know exactly where it is. And while we are locating that we are thinking we may as well be putting things in running order. We wern't so certain how you all felt here; but I guess it is all right, so far as good intentions go, and when we start on the war-path this section will show as clean a record as a man could ask. If everything goes right there will be one of the men along to report some time to-day; and if they have had the luck I hope for it will not be long before we are on the move to gather in the booty."

"Clear ez mud; an' yit thar may be s'uthin' in it. Reckon ther best plan'd be ter send one ov ther boys ter git it straight, though I'm willin' ter say thet ef this gent are on ther squar', an' kin allers handle hisself ez he did a bit ago, I don't know a man I'd sooner work onder. But we got ter be sure thet it's all right."

"Don't blame you a bit. That was the way I felt, and that was why I insisted on coming down here all by my lonesome self. The lady in yonder has caved in, Pandey McMurtagh has acknowledged the corn, and you may as well come in on the same platform."

"So we would, ef thar wa'rn't sich a thing ez a neck ter be stretched."

"Oh, come now, don't make me think you are short of sand in this detachment. If it will do you any good, and if there is any one thinks you have a better man here, I am willing to have it out with you all, right here. Only give me notice when you want to come and I am ready to meet one or all of you at a time, with anything from bare fists to a ten-inch siege gun."

After the exhibition they had just had of his prowess, the proposition had no particular charms for any one, yet something might have come of it had there not been an interruption.

Two more of the masked cutlaws appeared, and it looked as though one of them was a prisoner.

"Hyer's a messenger. He seems ter know ther ropes an' sez he bez a message fur ther gin'ral. See what yer makes outen him. I must be gittin' back er Dick'll hev a fit. He wants ter know how ther land lays, aryhaw."

"Tell Ratchett, with the regards to the new general, that everybody is lovely, and the chances are the boys will strike all the coin they can carry before the week is out. Get back as soon as you can, and see that a good look-out is kept. Billy here may have been followed, and we don't want any skulkers around just now. If they will give us another week here they may come and welcome. By that time we can be ready to change quarters."

Tom rattled this off as though everything was settled; and somewhat puzzled with what he had seen and heard, the fellow withdrew.

"Now then, Billy, what have you got? Open out. Anything further heard of the royal treasury? Or is it all too sacred to be heard by ears profane?"

"Guess, boss, ef they all onderstand the fu'st part ov ther new lay-out it won't hurt 'em to hear ther rest ov it."

"They are solid for Elegant Adam, every mother's son of them. Spit it out, now, and let them all know the good news—if there are any."

"Well, then, Ten-cent Jimmy got in the fine

work, and has it down on ther bed-rock. The coin is all bunched together at one spot; and that spot jest whar you wouldn't think. Ef Herb Kenton ain't ther man we're lookin' fur, an' ther gold all out at his ranch, you kin call me a double—no, call Jimmy—a double-barrel liar, frum 'wayback."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DANGER OF A POST OF HONOR.

WAS this all part of a deep-laid trap, or was it in good faith that these two men came to the front with such good news?

These were the questions Tom Reid was expecting the outlaws to ask themselves and one another, and if they had done so and given the answer he would have naturally expected, there would no doubt have been war, then and there.

He did not make sufficient allowance for the greed of the men which had been gradually fattening on what it fed on.

They were all ready for a change of some kind, and though this was not exactly what they had been looking for, it was good enough for all of them except the defeated Sandy, and he had lost his influence after the easy way in which he had been handled by the self-announced captain.

Once released, and fairly come to his senses, the ruffian had cowered back in silence, watching like a panther for a chance to make another spring, but afraid to move for fear of a worse failure.

One taste of the stranger was enough to show he was a hard man to handle; and he knew that after one more such defeat he could never hope to maintain his standing with the men who had so far been willing to recognize him as next to the general.

So it was that though there was some question in the minds of the men about accepting their new commander, there was little doubt of the intelligence brought by this messenger, and it was received with a faint cheer.

Luck was in Tom's favor, anyhow.

He had feared he would have some trouble in making Patent Pete—whom he recognized on the instant—understand the position of affairs; but he seemed as well posted as though he had been there from the start.

"That is about the way I had figured it, and Jimmy seems to have found the trail warm. When do you expect to move out?"

"Ef it's all right with ther boys hyer thar won't be ary waitin', bein' ez they think he's corralled ther ransom fur ther prees'ner, an' are all ready ter skip. Dan sez ther wooman are ter be held on to hyer tell we make sure about it, an' ef ther coin bez bin paid it'll be time ernuf ter turn her loose when we know it. He'll be at ther ranch at two, an' won't wait longer than three afore he goes in ter sack ther place."

"Daniel will have the lead fever if he gets too fresh. Is he running this outfit?"

"Spect he's not so sure ef it's you er him. It mou't happen ez you wouldn't git thar on time, an' thar's too much reesk in waitin' another day."

"I guess we will all be there—don't you think, boy?"

The men listened, half convinced at last. This sounded very square. These two might belong to the other section of the gang; though there was something singular about it.

"Ther rest ov us may, but I ain't so sure about you," said one, at length, speaking slowly.

"You two better stay hyer, an' we kin scout 'round ther same ranch an' see what we make ov it. That'll be heap sight better."

"What do you think of that, Billy?" asked Tom, carelessly.

"I think thet ef they arrove without yer ther boys out our way'll want ter know ther reason, an' he axin' it with ther sizes. I'm willin' ter stay jest whar I'm put ef it's ary coin in my pocket, but ez fur ez I know you're used ter bein' at ther front; it's whar yer b'longs; an' I spect you'll git thar, or bu'st a wheel."

"That's it, precisely. I'll be in the front rank, and if there are half a dozen men close behind, that know how to shoot, an' aren't afraid to do it, it's not likely I would be cutting up any monkey shines. It would be a sure thing for a over-the-range trip."

"And how do you expect to get there by the time you set?" asked another of the outlaws.

"We don't want to be parading toward Silver Bend by daylight, and it's not the safe thing to try to go through the town after dark."

"Reckon you kin reach Black Kenyon afore sunset, 'thout much chance ov striking ary one on the way? After thet, ef ther boss can't show yer ther short cut over ther hills, why, I kin. Ye'r a new man er yer wouldn't be askin' fool questions like that."

"An' Black Kenyon are jest ther spot ter put a ambush, an' swipe us all out," objected Sandy, for the first time since his discomfiture allowing his voice to be heard.

"Who'll catch the first lead, then, if we are in the front? All right, cover them, Billy!"

Out came the revolvers of the Sport with marvelous quickness, and at his movement Patent Pete moved likewise, and after the same fashion.

There were four muzzles trained on the party, and they pretty nearly covered the whole ground.

"I've got it again, and this time I can keep it till the thing is settled. Up hands, all, and swear to do one of two things: follow my lead after the ore; or draw off, and Billy and I will meet the rest of the boys on the spot and corral our share and yours too. No more gim-cracky nonsense, but come down to your milk!"

Very sternly were the words spoken, and if the eyes of the Sport meant anything they said, there was to be no delay. One way or the other the oath must be taken, or the shooting would begin.

Up went the hands. This last quick catching of the drop was too much for them.

"This hyer are ther boss we bin a-lookin' fur," said the man who had succeeded Sandy as spokesman, stepping a pace forward with his opened palms high above his head.

"We can't do better ner ter trust him; an' mou't do a heap sight wuss. Three cheers, say I, fur ther gen'ral; an' ef he kin lead us thar on time, hyer's the boyces ez will follow!"

"Hyer too!" added one man after another, stepping into line with the man who had led off, until all were forward with the exception of Sandy.

"All in but you! Old man, you have got to come into the ring or travel the long divide. We can't leave a kicker behind us. As you said a bit ago, it wouldn't make so much difference if there were no necks to stretch; but I have seen a man do worse things than sell out old pards when he had the mad streak on him. Which is it going to be?"

"This!" shouted Sandy, perhaps believing that he was not covered, since the pistol of the Sport was drooping, and his own was ready.

The report that followed the sudden outbreak was double, however; and that from Tom Reid's pistol a shade the sooner.

A careless turn of the wrist as he saw in Sandy's eyes that something desperate was meditated, and the man was covered, and the leaden messenger speeding on his way.

"Pick him up, some of you, and put him away where he will have to listen to reason if he hears it without trying to butt his fool brains out. He's too good a man to send out of the wet without one more try to make him useful."

Reid spoke even while Sandy was falling, and the men who had been looking on aghast at what seemed such punishment drew long breaths, while a couple of them started to look after the now motionless man.

The bullet had plowed its way along the top of the skull, making but a slight abrasion, and though he lay as if dead on the spot where he fell, the chances were it would not be many minutes before he would be up again and ready for mischief if the fit was still on him.

"Shell we tie him up, boss?" asked one of the men bending over him.

"If you haven't got a safe place to keep him; but one or two of you might see how he acts; first. If he will listen to reason, swear him in and let him run with the rest of you. But I can't be bothered with his kicking any more. It would break up the best discipline in the world if I had to crease him every time I wanted him to lie down."

Between them the two carried off the motionless form, and then Tom turned again to the men.

"The next three on the list for duty relieve Ratchett and his pards so they can come in and have their say-so. After that, every man who can be spared will get ready for the move. Even if we take the short cut there will be none too much time to reach Kenton's ranch at the hour the others expect to be there; and I needn't tell you there may be fighting enough to need the whole of us. Kenton don't have those Grassers about his ranch for their good looks only."

It was not likely there would be trouble with Rank and the others if Tom could once get them under the influence of the men who had accepted his self-proclaimed dictatorship, and he was inclined to believe his *coup d'maitre* was a success as far as he had gone.

To know how it was to be a continued success he wanted a few words in private with Patent Pete; and to get them without arousing suspicion required careful management.

Yet he accomplished it before long, and so naturally that it did not look like intention on his part. In the preparations for the move the two were left together to make what they could out of the odds and ends left from the outlaws' breakfast, and without any seeming secrecy the situation was discussed in sight and almost in hearing of the rest.

"You can see I have been handling your pet lambs tenderly, I hope you are satisfied," said Tom, his mouth full of cold venison.

"Did it up to ther king's taste," responded Pete, reaching for the hard-tack.

"But you got ter git a move on yer. This are jest ther beginnin'. They are willin' ter foller

yer lead, but they ain't trustin' yer wu'th a cent. Ef yer tried ter walk ther lady off thar would be sounds frum home in B. flat. Ther oro are jest whar I sed it war, an' we got ter take it an' pony up ther ransom. We kin undertake ter deliver ther goods, an' I reckon about that time you'll be ready ter resign."

"Don't know, Peter. It seems to be rather a comfortable berth as long as you have the whip hand of them, and I don't know but what I might be induced to hold on long enough to learn the ins and outs of the trade." By the way, there's another woman in the case, who sort of belongs here, and sort of don't. I have been going on the supposition she is the daughter of the chief, and she don't object to the notion. So far, she is inclined to accept the gospel as I have brought it, and stand in with me; but I suppose she will be over the traces about the time things are the most complicated."

If he had not been afraid of attracting attention Pete would have executed an audible whistle. As it was he went through the motions.

"Jest ez well fur ther lady—by ther way, ther are a lady?"

"Of course. The mother of the younger one in town, just as we suspected. She swears by me. I wish I was sure I was as sure of the other."

"Young an' good-lookin'?"

"Young and good-looking."

"Then, I reckon you're all right. She must 'a' bin a-peekin', an' ef she see'd ther way you tamed ther tigers she'll be dead gone on you tell a better man comes to ther front; an' that won't be fur some time."

"But is this the straight tip about Kenton? And how did you find it all out? Ten-cent Jimmy never told you?"

"In course he didn't. Made ther riddle meself. Ther chap ez Larry called Mr. Dumphy war purty well used up when he rolled out ov me fingers, an' didn't start fur home tell you had left town. When he went I followed, an' thar she war. Landed right at Kenton's, and beared a bit ov talk frum a fellow what had come in frum ther rest ov ther gang, thet let me on to ther revolvuskun they war plannin'. Ther rest are what seemed ter come most nat'ral when I got ter talkin'. But I bin a-takin' big chances ter git even with the man ez tried ter play me dirt. Don't yer go back on me, er I'll never hev faith in man ag'in."

"We'll stick together because we have got to. If I had not given you my promise I would have run things different, but I suppose it is just as well. You don't want to make any mistakes about that short cut from Black Canyon; and then, if we get to Kenton's ranch before mornin' we'll carry it with a whoop. After what I have learned of him—if he really is the chief—or was—I won't be apt to feel much mercy for him."

This was all there was opportunity to say, but it was enough to confirm Tom in his present line of action. In a short time the arrangements for the march were all made. Three men were left behind to do guard duty, and the rest moved off in fair military order, with Tip-top Tom at their head. He had done a good many reckless things in his life, but it struck him as he gave the order to advance, that this was the next reckless of all. If Kenton did shoot him from in front, or Sandy who had revived and given in his adhesion, get in his work from behind, what would become of him if they struck a party of regulators? "I'd have to fight it out on this line, for if I had an angel for attorney he couldn't explain the truth as it is."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

PATENT PETE understood the by-roads through the mountains if Tip-top Tom did not; and he managed to give his information to the latter got the credit for it.

The skillful pioneering was a touch above the outlaws, who had no previous knowledge of the routes selected, and had thought they were impracticable for a body of men on horseback. By the time they had reached the Black Canyon, they had a higher respect for their new leader, and began to feel he was quite one of themselves.

From there on the road was more difficult even, but it also had the advantage of being lonely, and but seldom crossed by a trail. If General Principles—or Herbert Kenton, as he was now supposed to be, was on the watch for any such move as this, they would most likely come in on his unguarded side, since the approach toward the ranch would be from the rear.

The statements made by Tom Reid had been none too definite, and on the way the men sought to learn more of what had occurred. They did not attempt to question their leader, but Patent Pete was under the pump; and he actually showed information.

It came, however, in so glitteringly general a shape that it did not conflict with what Reid had said, and left them little the wiser.

According to the Practical Plumber there had

been a deposition and a fracas, the late chief retiring after a fashion that left it uncertain whether or no he was seriously wounded.

At all events he had been able to crawl to his kennel, and in going he had given the opportunity to spot him, of which they were now taking advantage.

With this they were forced to be content. As they were all more interested in the possible amount of booty to be carried off, and the probable quality of the men they would find guarding it, the outlaws did not harp too long on the subject, and Pete was satisfied that he had been able to make his report tally with that of the Sport, even if he had never heard it.

The progress made was more rapid than expected, and they came within long rifle range of the ranch some little time before the hour set for the rendezvous.

There was a convenient clump of trees which served for a halting-place, and from here a view could be taken of the buildings. Beyond that the light was too uncertain to make out things with much distinctness, though Patent Pete declared he saw a little squad of horsemen in front of the main building, though almost as far away from it on the other side as the outlaws were on this.

"Oh, you must be sick," growled Dick Ratchett, who was with the expedition.

"More like it's where his Greasers have staked out their mustangs. If we could slide in on 'em, an' stampede the lot, it wouldn't be a bad stroke. It would bring 'em out of their breastworks, an' give us a chance at 'em in the open, an' we could pick the horses up later, as we go along."

"Right you are, Richard, if you don't think it will take too many men to do the work. It may be they are only the horses of the Mexicans; and then, again, the Greasers may be on them. It won't do to run any risks. And yet, it might be better to lay low till Dan gives us a sign—unless we are to do the job up on our own hook."

"Dan be hanged! Why ain't he here? We can wipe up the crowd in there if you say a word, and then the thing will be done, and we can see there is no more gouging."

"But don't you furgit that maybe Dan an' his crowd are a-watchin' fur us afore they begin. Yer don't want ter shoot too soon."

It was Patent Pete who gave the caution; but it made no great impression.

"We'll look out for that. Give me two men, an' I'll answer for the rest. If it's Dan, we want to know it. If it's mustangs, we are going to have them; and if there are any outsiders some of them will take a tumble. You bet they won't catch us in any trap."

Tom hesitated no longer.

"Take the men to suit yourself. Remember that; in our business mistakes don't go over again. If they charge you, lead them this way."

Ratchett was prompt to act on this permission. He quickly picked out his men, and the three silently stole away.

"Nothing like having plenty of backbone, is there, Billy? You and I would have tried for a safer course, but I guess this will turn out all right. Watch for the signals, now, and be ready to jump, all, as I say it! We have a good crowd here, but we don't know what is in the other."

Anxiously they watched, their eyes resting on the dimly descried figures of the horses. The distance was too great to distinguish if there were any riders, though as they could make out there were strong chances against it.

Then, suddenly, they saw Ratchett and his comrades dash forward at the horses.

"It's a stampede, after all," said Tom, watching the affair anxiously.

"If it don't draw them out of the house it may be out of the right line; but we will have to run the chances of its putting them on their guard. After all, if you have made no mistake I don't know but what I would like to have a round with them. That gentleman from Mexico, who bluffed me the other night, wants a straightening out."

Pete heard, but he made no answer. He had not given up his original opinion in spite of appearances—and a moment more showed he had not been mistaken.

On every horse there was a rider, who had been lying close to neck and shoulder. Not more than half the distance had Ratchett covered after coming into sight when each rider sat bolt upright, and without a shot, or a word that could be distinguished by the attacking party, the little squadron dashed toward them, at a speed greater far than their own.

"A stampede sure enough, but it works the other way. Now, then, if they turn out to be a squad of mountain detectives we are in a beautiful muddle. I suppose we shall have to fight on general principles, and run the risk of the after-uptake. Close up and be ready to bluff till we can know who they really are."

"Closed up it are," answered Pete, as he saw the men dressing their line and eagerly hauling their weapons.

"And it looks ez though Dan war comin' also. Look over yander."

The warning was scarcely needed, for Tip, top Tom had already caught the sound of horsemen advancing from a direction indicated—and was eagerly looking over his shoulder.

A second body of mounted men, larger than the first, was in sight, and though at some distance were advancing with a rapidity that would bring them abreast of the little timber motte occupied by the outlaws, about as soon as the men who were in pursuit of Dick Ratchett and his pards could reach it.

"You don't mean to tell me there was any truth in the yarn you have been telling about the rest of the gang being on hand here at this time of the night?"

Tom spoke in a sharp, quick whisper, bending toward the Practical Plumber so that his words would not reach the men who were a little further off.

"Straight goods at fu'st cost! I don't know they war ter be hyer, but thar war no reason why they shouldn't ef they wanted ter come. An' it looks ez though they did. Which side yer gom' ter fight on?"

"Neither, old man. We'll let them do the fighting; and see if we can't make our two little ends meet with them in the middle. Steady all, and don't lose your heads. First man on the right, there, stay to tell Ratchett and his pards the way to go; and follow the main band the instant he comes under cover! Next man, follow me! Billy, here, will lead the rest of you under cover as far as he can go, steering directly for the ranch after the lay of the ground helps you no longer. Take all the mustangs with you, and make no noise. It's coin we are after, and not hard raps. We'll leave those last to the other fellows."

There was a chance to see under what sort of discipline they were.

Reid would not have been surprised if there had been some one ready to question his movements, and attempt to argue against his intention.

Instead, every man moved off with clock-like promptness and regularity, each as his course had been indicated. He only waited until they had fairly started, and then, on foot, with his single attendant, stepped briskly out from concealment, and boldly advanced toward the second body of horsemen.

He was taking considerable risks in making the movement, for he was well aware it would not require much to arouse the suspicions of the men, in spite of the alacrity which they were following his lead. If they fancied he meditated treachery they would have no hesitation in shooting him down when he approached again, if not sooner.

And as for this detachment of horsemen he was charging, he could not guess who they were; but the odds were great they would be ready with their firearms, too.

The course taken by the horsemen would not have brought them directly to the motte, and for a little Reid's appearance was not noticed. If he kept silent it looked as though they might go by without seeing him at all.

That would not suit him; nor did he want to get too far from shelter. They were still some hundred yards away when he shouted:

"Halt!"

And then he opened a rapid fusillade, apparently in their direction.

That was enough. They wheeled, and dashed madly toward him as he, turning in his tracks, fled like the wind.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SURPRISE FOR THE SPORT.

THE fellow who was with Tom seemed to take the whole affair in solid earnest, for as he ran along by the side of the Sport he turned from time to time, and fired to the rear. If the shots did not count it was not from good intention; and they came close enough to the men at whom they were aimed to draw them on more recklessly than they might otherwise have advanced.

The Sport had timed his proceedings so well that he burst into cover before the pursuers were dangerously close; and just in season to come face to face with Ratchett and his pards, who had not come in as soon as had been expected.

A hasty word of explanation, spoken while still on the move, and the little party was following on the trail of the rest of the gang; nor did they vacate the motte a moment too soon.

From either side the horsemen hustled into the shadows. Before Tom Reid and his men were a dozen rods away from the spot he heard shots and shouts, and then the deep baying of hounds. He knew that for the present every one behind him was too busy to notice any traces of the men that each party had really followed.

He certainly did not stop to listen to the racket. His plans had been laid on the spur of the moment, but no time was wasted in carrying them out. All he feared was that the ranch would be attacked before he could reach the main body of his forces.

Patent Pete, however, was not at all anxious

to come too far to the front, and had halted, and dismounted his men, just beyond pistol range from the buildings.

"They are at it," he said, as Tom came up, a trifle out of breath with his hard run.

"Tho't it might be ez well ter give 'em time ter draw 'em outen ther ranch, ef thar's arybody a-holdin' it. Then we kin slide in, an' make ourselves to home."

"Very sensible that, since we couldn't have reached the house before the alarm would have been given. But we want to know just who it is, scouting around here this time of night; and I don't know any one better fitted for the job of finding out than yourself. Take the back track and see if you can get near enough to learn without getting in the way of harm. If you can't, come back and take a hand in. By that time there will be work for all of us."

"All right. Thar's some jobs I'd like better, but I guess I can do it accordin' ter Gunther. So long."

Pete went away without any hesitation.

"Yer ain't goin' ter wait tell he gets back?" inquired Sandy, with a show of much anxiety.

"Thar ain't no tellin' when he will get through; an' it don't matter who they all are ez we're on ther inside of ther ranch. We kin hold it ag'in' fifty, ef we kin open the doors to our pards ef so be that Danny an' his men are in ther racket."

"I understand that as well as you do. Move along all, but keep the horses in the rear rank till we git up to the house. We don't want to be crippled in the send-off. Quiet, now."

A surprise was hardly to be hoped for, with a conflict going on not a quarter of a mile away from the house; but they moved none the less cautiously, their steps at first taken nervously light, as though they did not want their footfalls to reach even their own ears.

The steps quickened as they went along; and at last, at a whispered order from the Sport, the front rank hastened its speed, breaking into a run a few rods from the house. There were several moving figures nigh to the door at which they were aiming, and toward these they bounded.

"Steady therel" exclaimed Tom.

"Don't shoot! Can't you see who it is you are aiming at?"

It was a sudden thought of his, but it served his purpose well enough.

The men had already thrown up their hands; but at a glance they saw the black masks, and hesitated.

"Is it thou, Senor Kenton?" asked one, advancing a step toward the Sport.

"You bet it is!"

Reid felt sure he was on the right track, and hesitated no longer.

Up to this he had been troubled with a haunting suspicion he might be making the mistake of his lifetime in going against Kenton's ranch; but after hearing that question to a man in the mask of the outlaws he felt sure he was not going wrong.

As he spoke he also sprang, and leaping to the side of the man, twisted him off of his feet before he could recover from his surprise.

The man was a Mexican, and his companions were of the same nationality. Attacked at close quarters they dropped their hands to their knives, and so gave the chance for a noiseless struggle which could have but one ending.

The men went down, and the way to the ranch was clear. The rush went on, the door was open, and the men streaming in, before the two or three defenders who came into sight could realize what had happened.

"Steady, now," was Tom's order, sternly given, as he saw his men had lost their heads, and were about to scatter around the place.

"This may be a bigger contract than we think for. Keep together until Billy comes, and we find out the meaning of what we saw outside. This would be the worst kind of a trap if they came back on us in force, and we didn't have the door shut. Time enough to sack the ranch when we have made ourselves safe; and every man shall have his due share of the plunder. Have the horses in here, and then bar the outside gates, and man the works. No telling how soon the fight will begin."

Sharply spoken, the command brought most of the outlaws to their senses.

It was not likely if their old commander had his treasures hidden there he would leave them in position to be found without something of a search; and it would be madness to have the way open for an attack on them while that search was being made.

Without further orders the place became a regular fort, with keen eyes on the watch, and it would have been hard for Herbert Kenton, or any one else, to lead an attack on it that should be a surprise. As Patent Pete came sliding back, puzzled by the silence within the ranch, and actually uncertain by whom it was held, he was halted at long range, and only suffered to approach when he had been thoroughly identified.

"It's Dan an' ther boss, fightin' it out on general principles, sure ez you live," he exclaimed, as he saw the Sport.

"They seem to be purty even balanced, an'

won't git this way fur a bit, but I wouldn't be wastin' any advantages. When they do come it'll be a b'ilin'. Ef Dan gits hyer fu'st it may be we'll be in a bit ov a pickle; but I'd jest ez soon bluff him ez any one, ef he wanted ter put on airs with ther men ez did ther real work."

Pete spoke hastily, and for the benefit of the men at large; but as his eye met Tom Reid for an instant he gave a wink which showed there was something back of it all he had not cared to tell.

From the men arose a faint cheer when they heard the rest of the rebels were near. Then in the breath of silence following, Tom heard something like a smothered scream.

As has already been explained the building was a large one, and ramblingly built. The cry seemed to come from far away, through more than one closed door; but Tom recognized it as from female lips, and gave a sweeping glance around, to see how much of his force was present. Then he darted away to find the cause of the scream.

"Two or three of the boys are missing," he thought, "and it's dollars to cents they are exploring on their own hook. If they have commenced to sack the ranch without orders they will think King Stork has got them, sure."

So he thought as he darted along, passing through one door after another, and finding traces of the hasty passage of some of his men in front of him.

Then, in a room just in front he heard voices at last.

"Back, sir! back!" he heard, in a tone he fancied was familiar; and as his hand touched the door there was a snarling curse, a scuffling of feet, the sharp crack of a small revolver.

"A weapon like that is no good with a man of general principles, it is well I am on the carpet," was the thought of the Sport as he crashed through the door. In his haste he even forgot to be surprised, but left that for later on, when he should have more leisure.

A woman stood with her back to him, in front of her a table, which she was using for a breastwork, and her outstretched hand held a still smoking pistol, while on the other side of the table a masked outlaw was staggering back, clutching wildly at the air with one hand, the other pressed tightly against his breast.

Two more men were in the room, but they were engaged in a scuffle with something that might be human, but was too small to be readily seen; and appeared to be much like the Irishman's flea, which was not there when a hand was put on him.

Before Reid had opportunity to fairly take in what was going on, Handy Sim, the boy from the Gruffs, dodged out from under the legs of one of the men, upsetting him as he came.

With a quick snatch the youngster possessed himself of a revolver from the belt of the outlaw, and then bounded on to the side of Nellie Neville, just as the third outlaw, looking up, recognized the mask of the chief.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, in a voice which Tom recognized as belonging to Sandy; "it's ther fraud hisself. Hyer goes fur his scalp!"

Out and up came his revolver; and it was trained on Tip-top Tom with deadly aim.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CHEST OF TREASURE.

THE ruffian had only been biding his time; and now that the way appeared open he intended to execute summary vengeance for all he had received at the retreat. If he had given up there it was not because he recognized the chances were all against him.

He thought he had a shade the advantage now; and suspected if he did not do something he would find himself in the line of punishment when the affair was over.

If the gaze of Tip-top Tom had not been fixed upon Nellie he might have found the Sport ready for him, in spite of the suddenness of his move; but with a woman in danger Tom Reid was scarcely likely to think of himself.

The third man, having recovered from his bewilderment over the small boy, was dashing at the young lady, the hammer of whose revolver had just clicked uselessly on the butt of an empty shell.

Handy Sim was on the look-out, though, and bound to enjoy himself to the top of his bent. Shooting a live outlaw was a blessed privilege which was only next to being an outlaw himself. He cocked the captured weapon, took hasty aim, and fired even while Sandy was speaking.

After that the danger was over for the present. Tom disposed of the uninjured man by a swinging hit on the jaw, and then caught Nellie on his arm as she staggered aside from the force of the collision with the bandit as he fell.

"Good heavens, Miss Neville, what are you doing here?" he exclaimed, as he swung her away from range of the door, through which he could hear the sound of hurrying feet.

"Kenton is the man from whom you have everything to dread, and if you had fallen into his hands all our work would have been undone."

"I fancy I have been in his hands—but who, sir, are you?"

She twisted herself out of his grasp as she spoke, and looking upward caught a glimpse of the mask on his face, which seemed to answer her question.

"Stand back, sir," she continued, menacing him with her useless revolver, a look of stern determination on her face.

"I have blood already on my hands, I would not have more."

He would have explained somewhat his appearance there in such a role, but the opportunity was lacking. He was not ready to break with the outlaws, for he might need them when the controversy out on the plain was settled; and the noise of the shots had brought two or three of them to learn what was the matter."

"Excuse me, miss, if I have handled you a little roughly, but I was in haste to get you out of the line of danger. I assure you if the men have treated you with any discourtesy they were doing so against orders, and they seem to have been well and properly punished. We can but illy spare them, but they got nothing more than their deserts."

"Let them take care of each other," he added, turning to his men.

"They tried to bite off more than they could chew, and got a proper choking. We are not making war on women and children; and when we came here it was for a single purpose. Carry them out if they are really hurt; but if I find them in mischief again I'll down them myself. And if I do it, you bet it will be for keeps."

His afterthought perhaps saved an explosion, for the men were unwilling to abandon their comrades, no matter what they might have been doing. They were burdened pretty heavily, dragging away two badly wounded men, and if Kenton had turned up at that moment they would have been as apt to take to their heels as to fight.

When they had disappeared, Tom, with a word or two of command, ensconced Nellie and her young attendant in an adjacent room, telling them to lock the door, and shoot down the first man who might attempt to force a passage.

This was not the time to go into explanations, and he went back to push on the work he had in hand.

Patent Pete, however, was ahead of him.

As being near to their leader he was a recognized lieutenant, and privileged to do as he chose.

He was sharper than most of them, too. He went off on an exploring expedition at the time Tom left the room; and he returned in time to meet him.

"I think I've struck it," was his whispered salutation.

"Ef ther rest are ter come in on the plunder yer may as well hurry 'em up."

"Bless your soul, of course they are to come in. It's a square deal I'm giving them, without a flyer. I have no right and title to a dime in the lay-out. All I want to get out of it is the ransom the infernal scoundrel asked for his prisoners, and if my share don't come to that I'll throw in the business ends of my sixes to tip the beam."

"I don't know how they are running things now, but in my time ther head-center took a quarter—an' ez much more ez he could gobble. Ef thar's a surplus what yer goin' ter do with it?"

Pete asked the question with some anxiety. He might have been in earnest when he reformed, but he had not lost his appetite for the loaves and fishes, and the Sport thought he understood his meaning too well to hesitate with his answer.

"See here, Peter, I'm running this as a public benefactor. I'm a philanthropist from the word go, and all I do is for the benefit of mankind. If I thought a dollar of the booty was going to stick to my fingers when I got through I'd go out and hang myself. If there's any surplus I'll hand it over to Herbert Kenton—or whatever the name of the present General Principles may be. You'll get your expenses out of it, or you can take a share if your conscience will let you; but outside of that I am sorry to say my principles will not let me go. If that is satisfactory, drive on with the clam wagon. If not, toot your horn, and peddle your goods to the best advantage."

"Squar' talk, an' all with ther bark on. It's ther kind thet suits me, an' you'll find me with yer all ther way an' back ag'in. This way, then, an' bring what boys kin bespared. Thar's a safe in ther cellar, an' a crowbar to open ther combination."

"All right, but we must first see how things are on the outside. I have an idea that one or the other of the two parties may be expected here any moment, and I don't want to be caught napping. Kenton would have no mercy on any of us if he got the upper hand; and I suspect the historic Daniel would make it uncomfortably warm for me if I was brought up for judgment."

But the battle in or near the motte did not seem to be over, though it was not being waged as desperately as at first.

Listening at the door for a minute or two

Tom heard a couple of scattering shots, which seemed to indicate there was a lull in proceedings, and that they were popping away at each other occasionally at long range.

If this was the case it was not likely either party could reach the house for some little time; and three men, one for the front of the house, one for the horses in the *patio*, and one for the rear, seemed an amply sufficient guard. The rest, at a word from Reid, followed Potter, who led them directly to the cellar, halting in front of an iron door set into the wall.

"It's a stout one, but I reckon it wasn't built ter beat a key like this," he said, as he stooped and picked up a crowbar, which was lying on the cellar floor.

"Hold ther lantern, one ov yer, while I try ter turn the bolt."

The assault was a vigorous one, and at the third or fourth blow there was a crashing of iron, and the way was open.

When the door swung back a small closet was before them, and on the floor of the closet a chest which had a prosperous look about it, though it probably was not as large as the one they had hoped to find.

Though both closet door and chest lid were stout and ponderous, they were not expected to defy a leisurely attack, such as that which was made by Patent Pete and his able assistants.

Without much effort, and with but little delay, the lid was wrenched off.

Then the treasury was open before them.

"This comes of a man not being able to keep a regular bank account," said Tom, motioning the men to keep their places.

"I am not sure how, in justice, this thing ought to be settled up. If the rest of the boys are outside, helping to fight the battle, they ought to come in for their full share. If they have left us in the lurch I don't know but what finders are keepers. We haven't time to count very closely, but the first thing to do is to see about how much wealth is in the corral. There are some papers and books, too, that must have at least a hasty glance, for they may have their value. Hold that lantern a little closer if you please."

There could no longer be any doubt in the mind of Tip-top Tom. This was the treasury of the chief of the outlaws; and if Herbert Kenton was not that unworthy officer it was singular how it got there.

"All setter skun out ef he hed to," said Pete, looking around at the row of heads bent anxiously towards Reid as he rapidly sorted the contents of the chest.

"It wa'n't no wonder thar war some kickin' over his style ov divy. Ef that war on'y his sheer, ourn must 'a' bin bigger ner a bank; an' what I'd like ter know are, whar it all went to?"

"Never mind that, Billy," said Tom, looking up.

"You men pick out one to carry the boodle; then, the rest of us will stick by him. We can't divide it up now, and we don't want any mistake made. The party that holds this will have to walk very straight, and keep at the head of the procession, or he will be apt to hear something drop. Pick out your man."

There was no doubt each man would sooner have had a pro rata share of the spoils at once, and done his own carrying; but they were not quite ready for a revolt from the laws of the gang. After a hasty conference one man was put forward, and into his hands was intrusted the treasure. Between coin, notes and papers, he had a respectably sized sack full.

Outside of the episode with Sandy and his pards everything had been done in so orderly a manner it was hard to understand the work at the ranch was over. But it was, and Tom was anxious to get away before there was a chance for trouble. He could hardly believe luck would last much longer; and suspected that if the two parties who were skirmishing outside knew what was going on in the ranch they would join forces in a hurry, and proceed to try to wipe them up without mercy.

A hasty word or two of caution, as they ascended from the cellar, and leaving Pete to overlook the preparation for retreat Reid made his way to the room where he had left Miss Neville.

He was just too late to find her there. An open window showed the manner of her leaving, and looking out he saw two forms hurrying away toward the trail for Silver Bend—and bearing down upon them with silent speed were half a dozen horsemen.

CHAPTER XXX.

HANDY SIM SHOTS HIGH.

THE fight then must be over.

That was Tip-top Tom's first thought. One way or another the contest must have been decided, and it was high time he was getting out of this.

He did not want to have bloodshed, if it could be avoided; and for the present did not desire to come face to face with either party to the late combat.

As he looked again, however, he made himself sure that the horsemen were actually in pursuit of the two fugitives.

If he had acted on the spur of the moment he would have leaped through the window, but though that was the shortest course, a second thought told him it was by no means the best one. He hurried back to the men, finding them ready for the move, and anxiously waiting his appearance.

"Our boys have had the worst of it, and are in retreat," he exclaimed.

"There is no use to think of joining them. They will no doubt steer for the den, sooner or later, and we must be striking for the spot while the way is open. Follow the route by which we came, and if any one gets separated from the rest let him make a bee-line for Black Canyon, and wait. Billy, pioneer the way. I will join you as soon as I see there is no danger from the rear."

Before answer could be made, if any was intended, he had led his own horse from the patio, and swung himself into the saddle. It might look like desertion, but the booty was with the men, and they would hardly object.

Scarcely had he got out of sight when he tore the mask from his face and thrust it into his breast. Whoever it was he might meet, he did not want to appear before them in the character of an outlaw.

When he came in view of Nellie and her young escort, he saw they had discovered the coming horsemen, who, in fact, were now not many rods distant, and had turned aside from the course they had been pursuing.

Evidently they despaired of escaping by flight, and were trying to reach cover.

The leading man of the party was a dozen yards or more in advance of the rest. He marked the movement, and appeared to be afraid it might prove a success. He threw up his hand, exclaiming:

"Halt, there! We are friends, and no harm is intended. Halt, you foolish woman, and do not force me to take to measures that may be harsh!"

The challenge was wasted, for the flight went on. Most probably it was for the purpose of frightening Nellie that, as he ceased speaking, he fired a shot from the revolver in his right hand. Certainly, he did not count on the promptness with which the answer was to come. Handy Sim, looking backward as he ran, took a snap-shot at horse and rider, and bagged the former at the first effort.

The horse went down with a crash, and his rider was flung into the air as though projected from a catapult. Man and brute lay right across the path of the rest when they reached the spot, and there was a general pulling up of pursuers. They had not as yet seen Tip-top Tom, who was coming at racing speed, and heading straight for them, or they might have been better prepared when he burst like an avalanche into their midst.

He meant no damage to life or he would have shot as he came. His objects were to choke off the party, and to see, if possible, who they were.

The horse he rode was one just suited for his purpose, for it was far heavier than any of the others. When Reid dexterously guided him against first this animal and then that, slipping his leg upward and back to prevent damage to himself, the shock was as good as a discharge of artillery.

The two horses staggered forward, and then with wild snorts gathered themselves up for a bolt. Before the riders knew what had happened to them, they were off on a panicky race, clinging to the saddle through the instinct of born riders, but for the moment able to do little else.

The man on the ground was comparatively uninjured.

He had lain still for an instant, and then slowly dragged himself to his feet. As he arose the Sport was staring down at him, and with the moonlight streaming full upon his countenance, there could be no mistaking the man.

"Major Burton, by thunder!" exclaimed Tom, surprised at the sight in spite of what he knew of the major's doings in the past.

"What is he doing here? He must have some old scores to settle up with Kenton, too. Or is he another ex-chief of the masks? If they keep on coming at him from all sides, I'll have to shift base and back Kenton's game myself. He seems to have his hands full, and I always did sympathize with the one against the mighty."

There was no time for further thought, if he wanted to overtake the flying girl. He did not know whether he had been recognized, and he did not care. With a touch of his heel he sent his horse on, though by this time the fugitives had disappeared.

He did not follow directly on the course they had taken.

Handy Sim was a boy full of tricks and dodges, and it struck him that the moment they had taken to cover he would be apt to make an effort to reach the trail for the Bend.

He was not wrong in his calculation. Before he had gone far he caught sight of moving figures.

"Go slow there, Handy Sim," he called, being careful not to raise his voice higher than to

enable it to reach the ears for which it was intended.

"I am here to help Miss Neville out of the scrape, and the sooner she gets under my wing the safer she will be. Between Herbert Kenton, Major Burton, and the Black Masks of Silver Bend, she has been having a rough deal of it, but things are on a string now, and everything will be lovely from this on."

He was uncertain whether Miss Nellie had recognized him at the ranch, but if she had a few words would explain his presence there, if he could only prevail upon her to give him the opportunity.

Handy Sim was disturbed in his aim, and shot high.

Though Reid had not an idea of the fact, the boy was just about to try another snap-shot; and he recognized the voice of the Sport too late to prevent his finger from pulling the trigger it was resting on.

"Say, old man, that wasn't meant!" shouted Sim, in some dismay as he heard the report of his weapon.

"I got ther muzzle turned ther other way now, an' I'm ready ter kick meself all over fur havin' ther trembles in my fingers at my time er life. We can't wait on yer, but come ahead, an' it won't be hard ter ketch up."

"After that shot the sooner we get out of this the better. You had the major and his men off the trail, but a deaf man would know which way to look for you now. Miss Neville, take my horse again! Give him his head, and don't stop till you get to town. I don't know what all the dangers are, but there must be a pack of them here, and as usual you are in the thick of them."

He asked no questions, for he did not want to delay the young lady, and he could guess why she had come to the ranch as well as if he heard her reasons. While he spoke he was tumbling off his horse, and as he ceased speaking he held out his hand to assist her to mount.

"You have come again when I needed you, and I will accept your aid as I have done before if you tell me that you have done anything."

Once more she had almost betrayed herself. It was hard to keep her lips closed on the subject that was uppermost in her thoughts, and which she was almost certain he had long ago fathomed.

"Yes, yes! I understand. There is no use to try to make a mystery of it. I have seen your mother. She is well and waiting, I think I can promise you that she will be safe, and that you will see her before long. Now, go!"

"You cannot expect me to leave you at once after hearing that. I must know more. How did you come to see her, and where?"

"Don't be too inquisitive. There are some things it is as well not to talk about, even though they are done with the best intentions. I started out on the trail of General Principles, and you can imagine where that would land me. I am as anxious to hear your story as you are to hear mine, but this is not the time for it. I am wasting valuable moments looking after your safety—do not let your curiosity and impatience work mischief beyond remedy."

"Not another word will I say. Good-night!"

She spoke with resolution, and with the last word closed her lips firmly, as though she recognized what a struggle it would be to keep her promise and was preparing for it.

From his hand she lightly sprang into the saddle, and gathered up the reins with her eyes turned away from the Sport.

"And, youngster, you had better go along with her. She may need a protector as well as a guide, and I do not know any one I would sooner trust to perform the duties of the post. Keep her going till you come in sight of Merry May, and if all goes well I'll see you both in the morning."

He struck the horse sharply with his hand, and it darted away at the stroke. Then he faced about to meet the major and his allies, who were once more on the trail, and approaching rapidly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MRS. NEVILLE MAKES HER ESCAPE.

BACK in the haunts of the men whose principles were of a general sort, and whose habits were peculiar, things had been going on after a fashion hardly anticipated by Tip-top Tom.

He had been anxious to see the two females before leaving the retreat; yet had failed to do so. Without the bloodshed which he had sworn to Pete he would not make, except as a last resort to save himself, he knew he could not rescue the prisoner; and he was not anxious to have too much to say to Mira. There was something in the manner of the young lady which told him she was not far off from suspecting the truth, and he was not sure she would not run some risks herself to unmask him if she had the opportunity.

But Mira knew more, even, than he had supposed.

When he left her presence she waited a moment, until he had time to reach the outer world, and then followed after.

The place was so well known to her she could guess at the spot where the coming interview would take place; and she knew it would be pos-

sible for her to get within hearing distance of it without being seen. When he was facing the band, and telling the miraculous story with which he hoped to befool them, she was watching and listening with an interest far beyond that caused by the consideration of her own safety.

"No mere police officer can be he," she thought to herself, as she noted the different changes of tone and manner.

"If he was he would have wit enough to understand his danger, and yet would lack the splendid courage with which this man faces the situation. Can it be he tells the truth? It would hardly be stranger than that he should concoct such a scheme to enter the lair with the tigers watching for the chance to devour."

The ease with which he disposed of the obstreperous Sandy caused astonishment, for she knew the reputation of the man, and had expected to see him down the stranger with scarcely an effort.

When, finally, the pretended messenger was brought in her eyes glittered, her jaws closed together till they emitted a sharp click, and for the first time she began to really believe. This last fellow was no stranger to the place, and could find his way about blindfolded.

She listened to the end, and then stole away to her companion.

Mrs. Neville looked up as she re-entered the room.

She could see that something had gone wrong; and scarcely thinking to obtain an answer asked what it was.

"Nothing for you to worry over. I suspect I am more of a prisoner than yourself. There is nothing to do but to possess our souls with patience."

"And the man who was here? Who was he? For what reason did he follow us here?"

"That I cannot tell as yet; but at any rate he is the foe of the man who has been commander here; and no friend of mine. It may be I am in as much danger as you. Time will show. He has kept clear of saying more about us than he had to, and that is what makes me suspicious that he has some designs against us of one kind or another."

"For evil or for good?"

"The end only will show," responded Mira, gloomily.

"I am involved in the toils, and the end can hardly help but be evil for me. If you have luck as well as courage you may escape, none the worse."

"There has been a change, then, in the condition of affairs, even as the man who was here warned us?"

"It seems so. If he tells the truth, there has been a great one. Yet it cannot be that he thinks I believe him. A man as brave as he would not be so cruel as to leave me so much in the dark as to the fate of the person known to you as General Principles, if he thought I would really believe him."

"How can you help but yearn to know the truth? And if you do, there is but one way to find out. I have endured confinement here with some hope, because I thought you would protect me from any great harm until, in one way or another, I left the place. But if you are powerless what hope in the future can I have?"

"More, perhaps, than I. You are not in the danger your daughter would have been. That was one thing I insisted on. I had been among these men often enough to have no fears for myself; but I was not so sure it would be wise to leave her here with no more powerful protector than myself. There might have been some trouble in getting her out of their hands. If you pay ransom, or, if they find you are worthless as a hostage, they will turn you loose. But, if the insurrection has gone the lengths it seems to have, there will be money in holding me."

In spite of the fact that the relations of the two had been jailer and prisoner there had sprung up between them a feeling hard to define. Mira had struggled to keep the prisoner at a distance, and Mrs. Neville had sought to view her with the scorn her position seemed to merit; and neither had been successful in their efforts.

A question from the elder brought more confidences, that ended in a repetition of the conversation overheard.

"It looks as though he was to assume control without a struggle, beyond the feeble one made by the one man. They are going off upon a raid, and whether it is successful or not, at the end of it there can come but evil to me."

"If that is the case why not try before it is too late, to save us both? With your knowledge of the place it ought not to be difficult to effect our escape. If there are but a couple of the men left behind, their watch will be apt to become slack; and once out of this den we could elude pursuit, and make our way to Silver Bend."

"And what would I do there? You forget that while that might mean safety to you I have little to hope from such a course. Until I know more of what this will all result in, my course must be uncertain. To learn more my best place is here."

"Yet you should know where to find the man

I suspect is your father. Why not leave me in safety, and go to him yourself?"

"If he is living he will find me here. If he is dead I must know it before I dare arrange other plans. Had all gone right I had hoped this would be the end of a course of madness; but it looks as though that end would be vastly different from what we had hoped for."

"Then, help me. Surely you are released from any obligation to keep me here."

"If I could, perhaps I would. But we are held in a tighter gripe than you know of. Probably there was a fear that my heart might grow tender or my strength fail. I am the jailer whom you see, but there is another one who would shoot us both down sooner than see you leave this room. And the passage through which the chief enters is guarded on the outside by a sentinel with orders as cruel. These men will be left behind, with enough to relieve them. I dare not fight them, and I could not try to murder them. We must wait."

"Sure, an' av it's the truth yez w'd be sayin', an yez thought it w'd be the safer for yez to shkip, say the worrud an' Pandy McMurtagh will be afther holpin' yez out av the howl."

Mira had spoken louder than she knew; but the answer from the outside would have been a surprise anyhow. Pandy had acquiesced so readily in the new order of things as described by Tom Reid that it was to be supposed that he was well satisfied.

That he should remain behind as one of the guard was a lucky chance indeed, for of all the men belonging to the band there was not another who was personally so devoted to the leader, or in whom Mira could so confidently intrust her own safety. When he had seemingly bowed to the authority of the new captain it had almost rendered her hopeless, since if he failed her she could expect little from the rest of the gang.

This time McMurtagh entered without his mask, and there was an uneasy grin on his ugly little face, that showed he was not altogether certain of his ground.

"Hush! Not so loud!"

Mira threw up her hands swiftly, by way of caution, and then advanced quickly to the side of the Irishman.

"It seemed hardly possible that you would be intrusted with the duty of guarding me, when they know how faithful you have been to the man they are no longer willing to call captain. Some one may be within ear-shot, and such a thing as this which you propose must be spoken of only in a whisper."

"Whisper or yell, phat wor ther difference? There's ownly a mon or two left to be listenin', an' Pandy McMurtagh is able for the bist av thin onny day in a wake."

"Perhaps—in an open field, but when a shot can come from behind at any moment. And if anything was to happen to you what would become of me?"

"It's true az yez shpake it, afther all. But whin Oi saw yez in dhistriss how could Oi kape meself soilent? Be azy, mavournen, tell the toime comes, and it's quiet enough we'll be az we lave the retrate."

"Ah, he is a friend indeed," murmured Mrs. Neville, her countenance brightening up at last with hope.

"So that it is not put off too long I can wait now in patience. But how soon will the hour come for the effort?"

She took it for granted that Mira would hesitate no longer; but the young lady was in no such haste as herself.

"Thanks, Pandy. I know I can trust you, and when the time comes I will call upon you. But it will not do to act too rashly, now that the way of escape seems opening. With you on guard we will be safer here than on the outside, and for the day at least we will wait and see what may turn up. If no word comes from the general in that time I will decide promptly what is to be done."

"Sure, an' it may be bist. I take no shlock in the worruds ov the omadhaun, phat said the gin'ral wor laid on the shilf; an' it's himsilf that may be tournin' up. Whin ye wants me, though, lit me know. It's not far away will Oi be, an' ye niver made fear danager wid Pandy McMurtagh at the fore."

With this the Irishman withdrew, and the two were once more left alone together, though with less fear for the future on the part of either. Mira was hoping for the appearance of the general, while Mrs. Neville, believing there were now double chances, had some expectation of either rescue or escape.

The day passed, and there was no sign of the general, though more than once Pandy found opportunity to appear long enough for a reassuring nod, if for nothing else. When night came it seemed that a decision could no longer be deferred; and to the joy of Mrs. Neville the decision was for freedom. With McMurtagh for a guide the two stole silently out of the caverns, and along the narrow trail which led up a gulch-like valley.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES AGAIN IN FRONT.

It may have been that Tom Reid hoped for some such movement when he left Pandy be-

hind as one of the guards over the prisoners, and the retreat.

From what he had seen and heard he was well aware McMurtagh was at heart an adherent of his old commander; and he knew at least that he would not willingly see Mira come to harm; while so long as the younger lady was protected the elder would not be in much danger.

"Shitip lightly, now," said Pandy, when they had followed the trail for quite a distance, until it had narrowed to a cutting but a few yards wide, between two walls of rock.

"Oi can't foind it in me heart to take an on-fair advantage av the bye, but Oi must hit him a whack wid me sthich whin he ain't lookin', or there may be bluddy murder afore we kin get out av this."

"He deserves all he gets," said Mira, fiercely.

"He has trusted his neck to a stranger, to go against a man who has been tried. The rope would be none too good for him. He will have to stand a reckoning with the true General Principles when he comes. All you heard that impostor say was false from beginning to end."

"Thruer phur yez, an' yit, av ther b'yes wantid to folly ony wan else, he wor az good az anither. It wor a sharp game he wor playin', but why would Oi be intherfarin'? The masther will come out all roight in the ind, bhad ciss to 'em; but he's not here now, an' we must do the bist we can phor curselves. Howld yer whist now, an' Oi'll begin to expliore."

Pandy had a Winchester with him, but he left it in Mira's possession, and stole softly forward, balancing in his hand a more favorite weapon. The "sthich" was short, round and heavy. If he got the crack that he expressed himself as yearning for the sentinel who received it would not be likely to give an alarm, and the three would be able to walk off at their leisure.

The young lady, however, was not willing to wait when she knew that a mistake on the part of the naturally blundering little Irishman would ruin everything. Once she had cut loose from the confinement of the cave and she was not willing that anything should stop her, and had it not been that she recognized the thorough faithfulness to her and the true General Principles she would sooner have trusted to herself from this time on than been handicapped by his squeamishness about the "b'ye" on guard.

"Come!" she whispered to her companion.

"Take this rifle, and fellow me. I can use my revolvers to better advantage, and it is not well that you should be without a weapon. Be slow to fire; but if the occasion arises that you must, see you make it count. Remember, we run the risk of meeting the returning band."

"I understand. The man I have the most to fear from is to be treated tenderly. If we meet with friends they are to be fought to the death. Better keep your weapons to yourself. In my hands they will be sure to be held wrong."

"You still doubt me? No wonder. Do not not for a moment have confidence in me, but fight your own battles as best you know how. Perhaps, when all is over you will find I am a better friend than you think."

"If I was only sure," muttered Mrs. Neville, the words coming too low to be heard by the other, who was already advancing along the route taken by Pandy.

The path was narrow, though not too difficult for a single horseman.

When a score of rods had been traversed the sides coming together overhead formed a natural vault, in which the gloom was impenetrable.

"Give me your hand," whispered back Mira, and hand in hand the two stole along toward the further end of the passage.

The distance thus to go was not far, and the sentinel was usually posted at the mouth of the brief tunnel. It was strange that they had not as yet heard anything of him or the Irishman.

Had they chosen to do so there seemed nothing to stop them from venturing boldly out.

Waiting for a little the two grew bolder, even though they were afraid that something untoward had happened to their guide.

"Surely, they cannot both be dead. We would have heard something of it had there been so desperate a struggle."

They were stealing softly out as Mrs. Neville spoke, and in her anxiety she arose to her full height and peered around, seeking to pierce the gloom, which might conceal friend and foe alike.

"Hist! Listen!"

Mira pulled her down to her own crouching position while the pressure of her hand enjoined continued silence. In the distance they could then hear a faint sound, which might be of low voices.

"As I live, I believe he is trying to argue the matter with the guard. The next thing will be a shot. We must see if our help will be needed. Oh, there must be no killing if it can be avoided; and yet, I would not have Pandy McMurtagh lose his life for our sakes."

In some excitement the girl began to advance, drawing Mrs. Neville along with her. Both were women of courage, but the prospect of having to take human life was unnerving.

Before they had gone far they located the two men.

In a gash in the side of the hill through which the fugitives had made their way was a spring. Pandy was on the one side of it, the sentinel on the other, both talking quite amicably.

"Sure, now, an' yez wouldn't be so cowlid-hearted az to deny me a taste av the craythure, an' me a-bourin' up wid the b'ate, an' the thoorst. Wan sbmall soup, to loughtin the heart av me afour Oi go to shlapel!"

"Go away with you, Paddy. Time enough when the boys get back with a barrel of the ob-be-joyful. What's one small bottle between two thirsty men? We'd both starve. If I keep it for myself there is one man that will be happy, and that is going to be my royal, own self."

There was silence then, save for a short, suspicious gurgle. Pandy was being tantalized after the worst kind of a fashion.

"Ah, that makes me feel like a scholar and a gentleman. I didn't want to broach it so soon; but when you came stirring my appetite up with your non-ense what could you expect? Appetite got the better of me. And now that I have begun on it there won't be enough to last till morning. For half a cent I would lay you out for the miserable, bog-trotting beggar that you are."

The speaker was not in earnest. His teasing tones told that. Notoriously he was the most persistent drinker in the camp, though seldom overcome by his fault. His rule was, little and often, and he always managed to have a supply of the ardent on hand, even when there was a drouth elsewhere.

It was through a knowledge of this, and how grudgingly he was wont to part with any of his stock on hand, that Pandy had approached him in the way he did.

The fellow was too well posted to surprise him from behind, and too watchful to fall upon him from in front. The approaches had to be scientifically made. At this mild tirade McMurtagh appeared to be lashed into a sudden anger.

"Yez would, would yez? Sure, an' ye can't lay out the one soide av me. It's foyght ye Oi will wid me bare hands, phor tin dollars, an' the whisky phat's in the joog. Come on, yez blunderin' coward! Pandy McMurtagh niver yit took a dare widout sbtrikin' it home ag'in."

"I don't mind the go for ten dollars, Pandy," answered the man, lazily drawing himself together. "Lost or won, that makes no great difference, and it's easy got again before it's needed. But I wouldn't risk the blessed mountsin dew, the lovely, lively, sparkling juice of the corn, on any such frolick as that. You might come at me with a club, don't you know?"

"An' that's the way I'm coomin' now!" cried Pandy, striking as he spoke.

He had at last worked himself within reaching distance, and the man had received all the warning he deserved.

The blow was effective. It came so unexpectedly there was not the faintest effort to guard against it, and as the man went down Mira dashed out of the shadows.

"Hold! Not another blow. It was a cruel thing, even if it had to be done. Help me to bind his hands and feet. When he comes to himself he may shout a long while before he can give the alarm."

"Av it had not been phor gettin' the horses it's sorra a bit would Oi have touched him at all. It wad have been azy enough to dodge away while he wor here at the spring a dhrinkin'. An' it's a faine fellow he is onny way, barrin' his passhun fur dhrink, an' it's bist to kape him out av the way av temptashun phor to night at the l'aste."

The man was triced up in haste, and as Pandy finished speaking he took a hearty drain from the flask which had served his purposes so well, then was ready for a move.

Though the men at the stronghold were so few it was not likely there would be any pursuit, the three were anxious to get away from the spot as soon as possible. Before many moments had elapsed they had picked their mounts from the small corral which the sentinel had been guarding, and turning the other animals loose they dashed off, en route for the neighborhood of Silver Bend.

At last Mrs. Neville had hopes of an early escape, and her heart beat fast as she thought of rejoining her daughter. The splendid courage which had so far enabled her to accept the position, without allowing her feelings or her fears to find more than the shadow of an utterance, had nevertheless been tried to its utmost, as she thought, and she hoped it was to be tested no more.

As the miles dropped behind them, and Mira appeared to be more gloomy than ever, she even found herself pitying the girl whose life was so linked with the outlaws, even though she did not appear to be of them. Though resolutely refusing to believe that the outlaw captain had come to harm, or was in danger, the doubt on the subject must have been growing stronger. When they camped for a rest, as they finally did, she had little to say, and Mrs. Neville, closing her eyes, fell into a slumber more sound than she had enjoyed since her capture.

Pandy was the only one of the party who was reasonably contented.

He had the coveted flask; and had, to his best knowledge and belief, served the general. With potatoes from the one, and thoughts of the other he whiled away the hour so pleasantly that at the end of it he also was beyond the gate of dreams.

When the two sleepers again opened their eyes it was broad daylight, and half a dozen horsemen were scanning the little group with some curiosity through the eyelet-holes of their masks, while the real General Principles was saying:

"I understand the position without further explanation. The villains were only too successful. When they reach the retreat again they will find us there to meet them."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAJOR IS DUMFOUNDED—AND SOMETHING ELSE.

"If you please," said Tip-top Tom, holding out his hand warningly as the major dashed up.

"I think I saw you shooting in the direction of a young lady, a moment ago. That wasn't the proper thing for a man of your inches to do. Suppose you shoot my way now."

As he spoke he planted himself firmly on the trail, as though, if need be, he would stop the horseman with his bare hands.

"Out of the way, you idiot! When I have the time to attend to you I will see your case is settled. Just now I have something more important to look after."

"You don't want to shoot, eh? Don't blame you, as you see I have the drop. And yet, it is not every man would have noticed as much; which speaks well for your eyesight. I am not sure I ought not to arrest you on the spot, and take you in to Silver Bend, so you could have a chance to explain what you mean shouting and shooting around here, this hour of the night. And you seem to have a gang at your back, a little bigger than one man would be handling for any honest purpose. Explain yourself, man; and if you show straight goods, at first cost, perhaps I will be willing to buy."

Reid certainly had the advantage, and he seemed determined to keep it.

The derringer that was almost concealed by his coat-sleeve, had menaced the major from the outset, and the latter, fuming at the delay, had pulled up. If he could be held there for a few minutes there was little danger he would be able to overtake Miss Neville.

While Reid spoke, Burton was watching what he imagined were the forms of the girl and her young guide. As they vanished in the direction of the Bend it seemed more than likely there would be no great trouble in finding them again, and he apparently gave up the thought of an immediate interview. Instead, he turned somewhat savagely upon the Sport.

"You have not heeded the warning I gave you when we first met, and seem bound to force me to make my threat good. So far there has been nothing against you except being seen in suspicious company, and in a neighborhood where an honest man could hardly have any business. If you had been wise you might have escaped altogether."

"Bless my soul! The idea of the Sport ever trying to escape from anything! And least of all from a man on whom I hold the drop."

"The drop will help you nothing, since the attempt to make use of it will be the signal for your death. Throw up your hands, sir! We may as well take you into camp, and if there has been a mistake made you will have the chance to show it."

"And now you are crowding the mourners. If there has been any mistake I prefer to fix it up, right now; and I only know one way of doing it. What do you mean?"

The major had spoken recklessly, but his words had acted as a signal, and his men, who by this time were close behind him, and wide-awake to the situation, were ready with their firearms.

"I mean that as a member of the gang known as the Men with the Masks we have business with you."

"You havel That is cool. Why, blame your eyes, you are one of the head centers of the gang yourself. It was a toss up I didn't have you hauled in for the fun of the thing; and I'll do it yet if I can ever get the points down fine, to prove you had anything to do with the Express messenger that was killed. I judge that was a bit of work about after your style."

Whether he believed what was saying or not Tom Reid knew he was gaining time for Nellie Neville, and was willing to talk till she was out of the range of danger, though he was getting rather tired holding these men off at the point of the pistol.

If he had not at this moment made a discovery it is hard to tell what reckless expedient he might have devised to break the deadlock.

"No use for that bluster. It only shows what I have been afraid of. I cannot spare you now if I would, add you must see that resistance is useless. These men are sworn officers of the

law, and no matter what happens to me they are bound to take you in."

"Regular mountain detectives, are they?" asked Tom, eying them dubiously.

"They are; and they have already captured the leader of your band, he who was known as General Principles. You will have plenty of company in your journey over the mountains."

"Then all I have to say is they are in rank bad company. Perhaps Silver Bend has not yet reached the pitch of civilization most towns of its size are supposed to have; but if it was any other camp in the world you would be hung as a horse-thief some time before I started on the aforesaid journey over the mountains."

"Hard words will hardly better your condition," responded the major without flinching, or showing any signs of anger.

"I think the Bend knows me too well for any wild words that you may utter to harm me."

"If Silver Bend knows you as well as I do there will not be much question about the matter for that is my horse you are on now. Where did you get him?"

The question was a home thrust.

The animal Burton bestrode was taken from one of the men with him after his own mustang had been dropped by Handy Sim, and he knew nothing about the ownership, or how he came into the possession of the party from whom he had received him. Up to this moment he had not noticed what sort of a beast he was, but at the pertinent question he looked down in spite of himself; and there was something about the horse that did look familiar.

While he looked Tom snapped his fingers, and chirruped:

"Up, Dandy, up! Drop him, old fellow!"

The snap of the fingers was sufficient without the words.

At the signal Dandy wasted no time, but giving first a terrific plunge forward he bounded high up in the air and came down with all four feet set closely together, and striking the ground at once.

Then, like lightning, he gave a side spring, and lifted his hinder heels higher than the front ones had been.

The sudden movement caught the major all unprepared, and though he would never have been unseated by any one of the actions, the combination proved too much for him, and as the girth burst with the last frantic shake, he and the saddle went flying against the men who had been attempting to steal past him and get within reaching distance of Tip-top Tom.

Again he had caused confusion in his ranks, and though he was on his feet almost as soon as he touched the ground, the mischief had been done.

With the one rider off of his back, Dandy was ready for another to get on, so that the other was his owner. He charged down upon the Sport, and as he came Reid made a half face to the left with his right hand upheld. It barely seemed to touch the animal gliding by, but the touch was sufficient for his purpose.

Up on Dandy's back he floated, sitting sideways, and looking back over his left shoulder to make sure the discomfiture of the major was complete.

"Ta, ta, old fellow! I will meet you at the Bend and have the question decided. For the present Dandy and I have business somewhere else."

If Tom could have furnished an explanation of the course of the major toward Nellie Neville, he would have been more willing to believe the announcement made as to the nature of Burton's force. Even as it was, there were certain ear-marks about the men that made him somewhat sober as he rode away. He had himself involved in a pleasant little complication, and he was not so sure what his next movement should be.

"He must be a little weak on his theory or they would begin to show shoot," was his thought, as he noticed that though there was an attempt at pursuit, no fire-arms were used.

"If he had seen me emptying the royal treasury, perhaps he would not be so thoughtful. He is as suspicious as the average mortal, and most any one would think something of the wealth might have struck to my fingers."

The shrug of the shoulders which accompanied the thought, was suggestive.

As for pursuit—with Dandy under him, and the way clear, he hardly feared it, though it might be uncomfortable to enter Silver Bend with such a procession trailing on behind. When the ground improved somewhat, Tom intended to change his course a little, and drop the whole lot without ceremony.

They held on him closer, though, than he thought for, and scarcely conscious that he was doing so, he kept Dandy bearing away in the direction of the motte where the fight had taken place. Without warning or thought of their presence, Tom dashed in upon a little group after a manner that was a surprise to them; and bid fair to prove dangerous to himself.

Taken off their guard, two men, who were sitting on guard, holding some three or four prisoners under menace with their cocked revolvers, suddenly arose to their feet and began blazing away at the coming horseman in a pan-

icky way that was more noisy than dangerous. The bullets whistled perilously close, but if they had hit, it would have been by chance; and this night all the chances were in favor of the Sport.

He recognized the facts; but he knew that luck, even such as his, might turn at any moment, and that it was not the safest thing in the world to wheel and gallop away with two men blazing at his back within point-blank range.

If they recovered their nerves as speedily as they had lost them they would bring him down without much doubt.

Unfortunately, too, the ground beyond was broken, and, in fact, Reid saw he had unwittingly run into something like a cul-de-sac, from which the best way of escape was the route by which he had come.

Without knowing who it was who faced him he did not care to answer their fire, yet something must be done. On foot, and with a mark that was stationary, he could shoot to a hair's breadth, but from a moving horse, low and level as he might run, it was not safe to try any fancy shots. If he hit at all it might be possible he would kill; and that was what he wished to avoid.

"Down with your arms!" he shouted, loud enough to be heard over the rattle and echo of their revolvers.

"Surrender or die! The boys have you covered, but we give you one chance for your lives. Steady, lads, and keep yourself in the shade till we see what the idiots are going to do."

The order and the threats were so steadily given that they carried terror and conviction to men who had already been thoroughly unhinged by the surprise. They dropped their hands; and as the new-comer held out a brace of shining barrels straight for their heads they threw away their weapons.

"As you are, now. The boys will step out and round you up!" exclaimed Tom, a laugh in his tone as he wheeled his horse.

To himself he added:

"If Dandy don't take himself and me out of harm's way before they can pick up their arms or draw others I'll take what I get. Good-night, my friends. It is time I was looking for the road to Silver Bend."

He made a turn to the right, and vanished in the sheltering shadows of the motte, but as he went he heard the sound of a shot or two, and the snap and snarl of a hand-to-hand struggle.

"If that is the major, just coming to time, who the thunder is he fighting? Wish I had the leisure to go back and inquire, but I guess I have business somewhere else; and as for pleasure—I've had enough of it for the evening, and it's time I was looking for a little rest. I don't often weaken as long as the cards are running my way, but this thing can't go on forever."

Very true it was that he had done enough lately to have fatigued several relays of ordinary men, but it might have been worth his while to have gone back. He might have been able to make his place with the major; though that worthy did not come up until some minutes later.

By the time Burton did come it was too late. Hardly had Tip-top Tom turned his back on the men who hated him when there was a movement among the prisoners, who had been keeping as quiet as mice.

One man out of them all had slipped the handcuffs from his wrists, and was worming his way along toward the guards, who, now that Reid was vanishing, had recovered their courage and their wits. As the nigst picked up his rifle, General Principles arose from the grass, and threw himself like a tiger on his back.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MERRY MAY GOES ALONG.

"Why didn't I think of it before?" thought Tom, as Dandy carried him at a strong gallop toward Silver Bend.

"The major must be the mystical Dan, of whom I have been hearing. There was as much truth as poetry in Pete's yarn. I thought the fellow weakened marvelously when I pinned him down as a horse-thief. After the blow-up to-night I wonder if he will dare to come in to the Bend? If he does, and we run foul of each other, I will be apt to make it warm for him. Now that I am in the swim I may as well go for the whole plateful of soup."

Nevertheless, the Sport was not altogether at his ease as he entered the town. His exploits of the night were not such as would endear him to a law and order loving community, and he was afraid they would not be popular even in a free and easy sort of a camp like Silver Bend.

Fortunately, as he thought, there was no one on the street, and the saloons he passed were only normally noisy, so that the news from the ranch had not yet reached the place.

Miss Nellie had arrived, however. Without saying a word to any one he replaced Dandy in his stall at the stables of the Giraffe, and then made his way to Merry May's, where he found Miss Neville awaiting him.

"Ab, you have come at last!" was her greeting.

"I began to fear something had happened to you: and you know I could not but be wildly impatient to hear the news. My mother! Is she safe?"

"All right, up to the present time, I thoroughly believe," was Reid's cheerful answer.

"Perhaps if you had confided more fully in me at the first I might have been able to bring her with me; but in order to make myself sure of the ground I was obliged to so tie myself up with promises I was compelled to leave her in what I considered comparative safety until I could take a fresh start."

"And she is still—where you found her?" asked Nellie, her face dropping, though Tom had previously said nothing that might have promised any other answer.

"She is still there, but the young lady with whom I found her can be trusted to guard her against the few men left in the retreat, even if they meditate mischief. The time has come when you must speak more plainly. I am going to try to rescue her; but if that is found to be impossible, the ransom can be paid, though how I got it I wouldn't care to tell."

"Oh, if I had only known I would never have risked my life and liberty going to seek the owner of the ranch. The men there are worse than the Black Masks. They have no principles at all, and were going to hold me prisoner until their master came."

"I suspect the master was there all the time, but was lying by to reit. If Patent Pete got in his work after the fashion I think, he was hardly presentable. But enough of that. I must know how the ransom was to be paid, else there may be a hitch in the proceedings. I want it all over and done with before the general can have time to get back to his lair, though I suspect he will not be traveling in that direction for some days."

"Oh," said Nellie with a shiver, "I was to pay it myself."

"Well, I declare! The cheek of General Principles is amazing. You were? What did he suppose was to hinder him from taking the ten thousand, and then sending you out to gather the same amount again? Why, it was a regular little mine of wealth—in his mind. That did not take into account the chance of Tip-top Tom getting a hand in the game. We have kept your secret so far, but I think the time for that is about over, and the best plan would be for me to gather up half a dozen fellows, and clean the ranch up on my own account."

"No, no! He swore he would slay her if I proved false to my mission; and I believe he would keep his word. He can lose his life but once, and it is already forfeit half a dozen times over. What would he care for another murder?"

"Not very much, if he got the chance for it; but I think he is abundantly provided with work nearer home, and will have no time to look after his preserves in the mountains. You will have to be left out of the game altogether, and I will run matters to the best advantage when I get on the ground. Give me an hour's sleep and I will be on the way. I can respect your oath as that of a woman who knew no better than to give it; but I have a blamed poor opinion of the judgment of the old lady, who allowed you to take it."

"Not a word, sir. She did it for the sake of my safety. If I was successful in raising the amount there was a way to communicate with them, and it was to be arranged so I would not have to go beyond the town—but that would take so long, now. I could not wait."

"And what earthly good would you do if you went along? If I tried to use you as a decoy an unlucky bullet would be sure to come your way, and that would be the end of it."

"Yes," interposed Merry May, who was listening in what had hitherto been silent interest.

"That would be the end of it under ordinary circumstances, but not this time. I haven't had an adventure for a month of Sundays, and am interested in the innocents. I am going along, and I'll give bail I keep the young lady straight."

Tom fell back in his chair with a groan that was not altogether mockery.

"That settles it. If one woman is bad medicine, with two how can I expect to get out alive? I have nothing more to say. I am in your hands; handle me to suit yourselves. Wake me up in an hour, and we will start. That is the longest I dare give myself, though I feel as though I could rest a week."

He tipped his chair back against the wall, snuggled his head into an easy position upon his shoulders, and before Merry May had finished looking at her watch appeared to be asleep.

After that the two women retired to the other room and held a whispered conference. Much as she desired the company Nellie was unwilling to allow the lady she was beginning to call her friend to thrust herself into danger on her account.

But Merry May was obstinate.

"From the era of Captain Gadley's gang, up and down, I have dealt with such cattle before, and I rather enjoy the doing of it if my pocketbook is not too heavily weighted. Rest easy. I shall come to no harm; and I will be on the ground to see you don't run in-

to danger. Now, I must run out to see after my mount, and let Harry know of the programme. If Mr. Tom Reid thinks he won't find me ready when the time to start arrives he is very much mistaken."

"But your husband—Mr. Melrose. He may object."

"Oh, Harry nods as I wink, which is what makes him the best of fellows. All I am afraid of is that he may insist on going along, and that I would not permit. There must be one of the responsible members of the family at home; and if I happen to mash my fingers he can take the box at Johnny Vincent's next turn, when the hour arrives to open the game."

The hour went fast enough; but at the end of it Tom was awakened up, and professed himself ready for the trail. He was somewhat surprised to find Merry May ready also. He knew her energy, but had thought there might be a limit to her powers of preparation.

However, he was not altogether sorry to have her company, though he would rather have had Harry also of the party. Without explaining further what his plans were, or what he had actually accomplished by his trip to the den of outlaws, he promptly led the way.

It was a long journey for the females to make, at the rate he desired to go, but he was anxious to reach the stronghold as soon as possible. Patent Pete might not be able to hold his men back, and it was possible the general himself might turn up before the prisoner could be spirited away.

It would have been advisable, perhaps, for Nellie to have had an hour or two more of rest herself, but that had been out of the question; and Tom thought that in the excitement of doing something for her mother she would be able to keep on going until the end was reached.

What sort of a reaction there might then be he did not much concern himself.

It was hardly likely to prove fatal, and on no other grounds could he have kept her back when he was once on the way himself.

As they rode on he had as little to say as was possible.

He could not help but think his knight-errantry was going beyond the bounds of common sense, and if he once got fairly to talking some alarming truths might inadvertently drop from his mouth.

Even Merry May was inclined to be silent, though, when the sun rose, her lips were somewhat loosened.

No woman, under the circumstances could forbear to ask questions, and Nellie had a great many more of them on her tongue than she dared or cared to utter.

Some of them broke out, anyway. Those addressed to Merry May got an answer, and those directed at the Sport seldom did more than elicit an unsatisfactory word or two. He had enough to do keeping his eyes open, and his wits about him.

"It actually begins to look somewhat familiar," was about the first uncalled for speech that he made, and hours after taking the trail.

They had reached the little dingle where he had originally rescued Nellie from her outlaw guides, and looking around him he could not help the utterance.

"And it looks as though we were not the first persons to travel the road, this morning," retorted Merry May, pointed downward.

On the ground she could see the tracks of horses; and though the ground was not particularly favorable for trailing, the marks looked too fresh to have been made a day or two ago.

"Right you are. I was looking at them myself," replied Reid.

"Those tracks were made by a party not far ahead of us, and I'd give a quarter to know who put them there. Perhaps Pete could not hold his men, and so led them around this way to take time. Then, again, it may be the major. Or, just as likely, it is the general himself. As there is no time to do any scouting we will have to keep on ahead, but I wish I knew who it is we are likely to meet. Best keep our sizes ready, I reckon."

"And mouths shut. All right. But don't be too severe on us if we run at the first fire."

"Just so you take Miss Nellie with you. If you can get out of danger I will look after the rest."

After that there was silence again.

The trail vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and it looked as though the men who made it turned off at right angles to the course the Sport wished to pursue.

And then, when they had seen nothing of it for some little time, and were beginning to believe they had dropped it altogether, there was a sharp hail from their flank, and the little party halted as though shot.

"By the rolling Rockies, as Oregon would say!" exclaimed Merry May, looking up; "it is General Principles himself."

CHAPTER XXXV.

HARRY MELROSE TALKS TO THE MAJOR.

HARRY MELROSE was as well trained a husband as a dashing young lady like Merry May could have expected to find. The pair got

along wonderfully well together at all times, and since the way she held by him, and kept the larder full during his sickness, Harry was more devoted than ever.

There was quite a struggle, then, in the mind of the Sport when the little lady briefly informed him of her intentions.

He knew the danger she would be in, to say nothing of the discomforts, and would far sooner have gone himself. The only thing like protest he did say was.

"I know you can take care of yourself as well as the next man; but it is a queer sort of a case for you to be mixed up with. Tom Reid is as good a fellow as lives, and I would do anything in the world for Miss Neville, stranger as she almost is, but win or lose on the deal, I am afraid people will talk. Have it to suit yourself, though."

"Of course I will, though I don't expect to run myself into danger any further than I usually do on such occasions—and you see I am here yet. Be a good boy, take things easy, and you will see that we come back rejoicing, and bringing much spoil."

"All right! But if I don't hear something of you by to-night I am afraid Johnny Vincent will have to hold the box himself. Silver Bend will have seen me starting out on the war-path, sick or well, able or not."

Mrs. Melrose laughed, held up her finger with a "Don't you dare," and hurried away. It was better not to discuss matters; and leisure was wanting.

Not long afterward Harry was uncertain whether he was glad or sorry he had not longer detained her.

At the head of some half-dozen men Major Burton came bursting into town.

He was not likely to meet any one abroad at that early hour in the morning, but if he had he would not have halted. Straight did he ride to the cabin of Merry May.

Everything about and in the little house was dark and silent when he dismounted and rapped sharply at the door.

A wave of his hand sent a couple of his men to the rear of the building, so that he was assured there could be no escape for any one within. As no answer came to his first application he rapped again.

"Locks as though they had taken the alarm and fled," he muttered. "I would hate to lose him; but for her, I do not know but what it would be best. I could strike the trail again when it might not be as hard to save her. With blood crying for vengeance, it might be hard to call the bloodhounds off."

"Better waste no chance," said one of the men, who had left his panting horse, and come to the side of the major.

"If they are not there we want to know it."

And as he spoke, Harry Melrose came airily down the street from the direction of the Giraffe.

"Hello, gents! That is my ranch you seem to be breaking into. If you please, hands off, till we know what is the racket."

He had an inkling of the truth or he might have opened the ball with a harsher speech. The major was not hard to recognize, and Harry Melrose had keen eyes.

"Glad to see you, Melrose. We don't want to do a bit more than our duty; and that much as kindly as we can. Of course, we know you are not in the mix; but it looks like a pretty sure thing that a guest or two of yours will want to give an account of what has been going on. There is a young lady stopping with your wife that I want an interview with; and as for the Sport under whose protection she seems to be—we want him. If there is not a necktie waiting for him he will at least be looking out from stone walls for some time to come."

"Shout the fact out a little louder, and if he is anywhere around here you will be apt to hear from him. What has he been doing?"

"He is one of the Black Masks, even if he is not their chief," said the major, coming nearer, and speaking in a stern whisper.

"You don't want to get yourself into trouble-trying to shield him."

"Oh, I am not likely to hurt my brains about a man who can't take care of himself. I don't reckon he's in there, but there's no objection to your going in and trying to see. I'll wait outside, though, till we find out whether he is there, and going to shoot."

"We are at liberty, then, to search the house?"

The major was uncertain what course the gambler intended to take; and though he was willing to face any man living, he did not care to have a foe at his back.

"Oh, search and be hanged, though I don't much guess you will find any one there. If I am not away off you ought to have come an hour sooner."

"A moment then, Mr. Melrose. We will look through the cottage, and if we find no one I have a question or two to ask of you. By this time you must understand that we have the law behind us, and are not doing any such work as this without authority."

"Drive on! Drive on! I am not as strong as I once was, and don't care about being kept standing too long without breakfast. If you

find anything suspicious let me know about it. I ought to have an interest of my own big enough to keep me from running away without your caution. I'll wait, don't be alarmed. And I'll listen to your explanations later on."

The sternness with which this was said showed that Harry was not as complaisant as his first words would have seemed to indicate, and Burton knew that if he even found Tip-top Tom and the young lady at the house he would have to tell more than he had yet done before her husband would allow him to interfere with Merry May's guests.

"In a moment," he answered, as he entered the house, followed by two of his attendants.

It was growing so light that a lamp was not needed, even for the dark corners. The little cabin was soon gone over.

When the major came out he was in haste to get away, yet it might be worth while to try to secure some information from the gambler, even if he did not take him into custody.

With no more evidence of complicity it might not be safe to proceed to extremities with a man like Melrose. With anything like the right on his side there was no telling how many lives it would cost to take him in, so that it was not the safest thing to undertake to file him away for future reference.

"See here, Melrose, you know I never say much more than I mean; and would not attempt to play dirt on my worst enemy unless he began the game. If you will talk square I'll do the same, and it may be the best all around. I'll swear to it in the outset that I don't mean you any harm."

"Take a load off of my mind," sighed Harry, gently, as he dropped his derringers into the side pocket of his coat.

"Men with big intentions so frequently come to grief I was actually afraid there was going to be a funeral, and I would be chief mourner. Now you are coming at me like a white man I don't mind listening in earnest. It kind of strikes me you must be a way off your base, anyhow, and it wouldn't hurt anything if I should set you right. What has been going on?"

"See here. I have not time to waste," began the major.

"You won't lose an inch of it if you are a square man, and will open out to bed-rock."

"To make a long story short, I located the arch-thief of the Black-masked Gang. I am not a thief-taker myself, but I had an old score to settle with him, and I got the men down here quietly who would arrest him, and to-night we went out for the game.

"We got something more, too. They came at us, about a dozen strong, and half a dozen hounds to back them. The dogs fought more desperately than the men, and suffered accordingly.

"We had them in a corner though, and when the leader got a tumble from his horse, and fell into our arms, the rest gave in. We had them trussed up and under guard, safe enough, as we thought. I left them that way, and went on to the ranch, on the way stumbling upon this Reid, who was evidently trying to cover the escape of some one. He stood us off, and when we tried to take him in got the better of us all by one of his shrewd tricks for which, I acknowledge, we were to blame.

"He seems to have struck straight for our corral, and helped to turn General Principles loose. In the doing of it two men were badly hurt—perhaps killed.

"Then, Reid, at least, and perhaps Herbert Kenton, struck for Silver Bend. We have tracked them here, we want them, and we mean to have them."

That was the story the major had to tell, though the reader understands how much of it was fact, and how much mistake or fiction.

Melrose was not at all excited over it. He had had an inkling of it already.

"That sounds interesting, and I guess it's as near to the truth as we can look for. You are away off about Tom Reid, but if you want him, and can get him, take him. He is the one to do the objecting. But where does the little lady come in at? You don't mean to say she wears a black mask, and stops stages?"

"Something like it, perhaps; and yet, I would spare her. I have tried to keep her from him, and the strongest ground of suspicion I had against this Reid was his efforts to bring them together."

"You are getting incoherent now, but I can guess what you mean. Let me tell you, though, Miss Neville, so far as she knows, has never seen Herbert Kenton, but was trying to see him in the hopes of getting money from him to pay a ransom demanded by this same chief of the Black Mask tribe. Whether they are one and the same individual I have nothing to say, but I can almost swear the Sport has nothing to do with him, nor had anything to do with his release.

"He rescued this girl from the outlaws, and was taking her to Kenton's because she wanted to go there. He has served her in two or three times of need, and finally raised the money himself. They have gone off together, and if he can't fix matters up with his pistols he

means to pay the cash. My wife has gone along with them, so I ought to know something about his side of the story."

After the first sentence or two the major listened closely. Melrose was not the man to tell a lie under such circumstances; and if he was telling the truth things were widely different from what he had supposed.

"And you mean to say you allowed your wife to go on such an expedition?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders, and smiled.

"You don't suppose she would try to stop me, if I announced that I was even going to take a dive through the flume. She promised she would try and keep all hands out of danger, but I know about how much that will amount to when the pinch comes. Really, I was thinking about taking the trail myself."

"And you think it would lead to General Principles?"

"Can't say; but I wouldn't be surprised."

"Of course you must have some idea of which direction they took?"

"I'll run the risk of that. Fact is, since you tell me the chief is off and away I begin to feel slightly uneasy. From what I heard I think Tom don't count on his turning up—if he should, it would make the work a trifle more dangerous than they had figured it out."

"Then why not go with us? There is no mistake but what you have given valuable information—more valuable to me than you think for. In return, if it proves correct, I can promise your friends will not be displeased to see us. It may be they will need us before they get back."

"I shouldn't wonder, if you don't forget what you have been saying, and have given me a true bill. I won't insult you by asking proof that it is; but just drop the gentle caution that you don't want to play fool with edge-tools. After that I am willing to take hold of the rope for a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether."

"Agreed; and you want to take something along that has a longer range than your derringers. There will apt to be fun in the mountains."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MERRY MAY MARKS TIME.

At the same time that Merry May spoke there was a cry from Nellie Neville. Peering through the partial screen of branches which separated them from the spot whence the summons to halt had come she had seen two female figures; and one of them was that of her mother.

"Steady, girl," warned Tom in a low tone.

"Don't let your feelings fly away with you and it will all come out right. If there are not too many of the thugs"—he had caught a glimpse of several of the black masks that identified the crowd—"we have them just where we want them. And we will make it mighty interesting, no matter what is the size of the gang."

While he was talking Tom was thinking, and after an electric sort of fashion.

He had not counted on seeing any of the road-agents for a dozen miles yet, but this suited him as well if he had to deal with the general himself; and the moment he heard that hail he knew that he had. There was no mistaking that voice. It was the same one which had bidden him hold his hands up as he approached Silver Bend for the first time.

"Steady, as you are!" he called out, in time to prevent a movement. "This is supposed to be a square deal, and this young lady with me has financial business with the chief. If you are wise and love coin you had better go slow."

"We don't do business with man or woman until their hands are up," came back the answer.

"Up with yours before we open fire."

"If you are betting on my doing anything of the kind that is where you are going to be left, bad. I don't want to seem to be blowing my own horn for the sake of hearing myself talk. It's for your own good I tell you that you want to go mighty slow, and listen to what I have to shout without any foolish interruptions. I shoot to a hair, and if it turns out it is the best I can do. I'll round you all up, or burst a wheel. The hammer of my Winchester is back, and the tube covers your breast."

"All that may be gospel truth, but if you think I would let you go unchallenged, even if the result to me were the worst you can predict, you are wider off than a man of your caliber generally gets. I know you; and when I say that it ought to be enough. I have six men here to your none, and they can all handle firearms themselves. Your only chance is to throw your hands up at once. This is the last time of asking."

"All right! Let's talk a little first. After I have said my say—so—all in your interests, I assure you—you can begin as soon you like, and I'll take care of myself—and the half dozen men also."

Just as cool as ever was Tom Reid, and there was something in his voice which made the general hesitate about opening the ball.

As he had said, the outlaws were seven, and

the army of Tip-top Tom was himself alone. It looked as though he ought to be annihilated at the first fire—and yet—there was the muzzle of the Winchester peering through the foliage, and the outlaw had heard the click of the lock as the hammer went back. A man may be bluffing with a seven at the head; but then, again, there may be four aces in the hand he bets on.

"Say your say," said the general, holding his men back by a glance.

"However long you may talk, the advantage will not be a whit the less in our favor, and I want to hear what you have to say for yourself. You did your work well, I admit; but this last move shows it was more through nerve than judgment. You are in my power, now, and I would be a treble fool if I allowed you to move from this place alive."

"Always taking into consideration that there are two sides to everything, if they are only the right side and the wrong side. In the first place, if you could just understand that the only question between us, so far as I am concerned, is in regard to the release of the lady you are holding there, it might simplify matters somewhat. I want her, and I intend to have her. After that, you can go your own way as fast as you can, and as far as the hounds of the law will let you."

"Liar, you!" harshly growled the outlaw.

"Do you suppose I have not had my eye on you from the time you started on your journey to Silver Bend, swearing to break up the Black Masks? How narrow has been your escape, not once only but thrice, or more, you can hardly know. But this time is the charm, and your chase will end right here. The tiger has turned, and the fun will be the other way."

"What a gushing idiot a man can be when he gets a theory! The whole story boiled down is something 'way off from that. I am simply Tom Reid, card-sharp and sport in general, on my way to a wedding. I stopped in Silver Bend because I had to; and on my way out of it came across the young lady in my charge in the hands of the outlaws. I gave up my own affairs to look after those of beauty in distress, though she would explain nothing. After that I had to do the best I could with the material in hand. By ways of my own I found out what was the trouble, and got things in shape till now we are here, ready with the ransom as you fixed it. All you have to do is to turn over the prisoner and accept the hard cash. After that we will go our separate ways—and the sooner you get out of range of the men from Silver Bend the better it will be for you. They are after you with a sharp stick."

"Thanks for the information; and I suppose you would be only too happy to tell them which way I went—if you had the chance. I don't think you ever will."

"You can make up your mind on that, and I'll give you about half a minute to do it," retorted Tom, who was not yet tired of his game of bluff.

"It stands this way. As Mr. Dumphy, as Herbert Kenton, as General Principles, you have had your opportunities; and haven't made much out of them. When I come back at you hard it will not take a wise man to say where to look for you, though he would be a fool, or a salamander, if he wanted to follow your trail. What I offer is the best you can do and you don't want to forget it."

"A dead detective is better than a live one any day; and if there is any coin in your outfit I will take it anyway, to say nothing of the ladies."

"As you have Pandie there, I suspect you know there has been a revolution; but how serious it is, perhaps Pandie does not know. The boys have secured the treasury that was in the cellar of the ranch, and are swearing to shoot on sight the leader that has been so swindling them. If you miss them, there is a little army of detectives closing up on you. All you have to show for your hard work on the roads is the ten thousand I am carrying, and if you lose that, you are a broken merchant. Better be honest for once in your life."

"Ah, you are the man who wanted to stand in my shoes! I might have suspected as much. If I had any thought of allowing you to go away alive, do you think I would remain in that intention now? I might have given you a chance; but after hearing that, your doom is sealed."

"All right. Pick trigger, and I will fire at the flash. You may down me, but it's the end of you."

"And up with your hands anyway! If Tom Reid wants to fool around over a coward and a thief like you, and waste time trying to spare your wretched life, that's not me. I have you lined, and when I count ten, I'll fire if you don't come down to the scratch."

It was Merry May who spoke.

Fortunately, as it seemed, the necessities of the path had caused her to drop a trifle in the rear, and when she recognized that they were almost, if not quite, in an ambush, she acted on the spur of the moment, and without waiting for orders from the commander.

She halted her horse, to be sure, but it was where not more than a glimpse of it could be obtained from the other side of the screen, and so

quietly and quickly did she slip down on the opposite side, that General Principles and his men, even if they had detected her presence a moment before, would hardly have suspected they no longer had her lined.

Tom Reid, however, appeared to have eyes in the back of his head, and had seen her stealing away.

From what he knew of the little lady, he was sure she had never deserted a friend on account of danger; and he did not believe she was showing the white feather now. If she was going, she intended to come again presently, and he decided to give her all the time he could spare to allow her to arrange her plans.

It seemed like a mistake to separate, yet both Reid and the young woman knew what an advantage in position meant. If she once secured that, it would be as good as a reinforcement of half a dozen men.

Of course, there was no certainty Tom could hold the outlaws at bay, even for a moment, but May was shrewd, and had guessed that for some reason the chief had more than a passing interest in Mrs. Neville and her daughter, and would try a parley before he would run the risks of having them in the line of fire.

So she crept around toward the flank, and just at the time when the deadlock was on the point of being broken, she came to the front after her own reckless fashion.

"One, two, three," she began.

It was a good way to test the condition of her nerves, listening to her musical voice counting off the seconds that lay between some one and death. There was not a sign of a tremor in it, though all the time several of the masks, at a hurried order from their chief, were gazing anxiously in her direction, trying to pierce the leafy veil by which she was screened.

True it was that if the shooting began Mrs. Neville from the one side, and her daughter from the other, could not help but be in danger, but Merry May was of the opinion that she and the Sport could do cleaner work than the outlaws thought, while she hoped Miss Nellie would escape serious harm.

And from the first sign the outlaws gave of their presence Miss Neville had acted with a coolness second only to that of May herself.

Just that one cry of recognition. Then she remained silent, staring at her mother, but leaving the whole conduct of affairs in the hands of the Sport. Now that she felt the end was coming she dropped suddenly along the side of her horse, in an instant screening herself from view.

"Four, five, six," the counting went on with clock-like regularity; and then the general suddenly changed his mind.

Up went his hands in token of submission.

"Hold hard, all hands! I am ready to deal. Ten thousand in hand is better than a bullet in body; and I can't go back on my word to the young lady."

"Just in time, listening to reason. Mr. Reid will go on with the deal, and don't forget that you will be covered all the time."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PATENT PLUMBING.

"MAKE me sure there is no swindling about your game, and you are welcome to the old lady as soon as you can take her off my hands. And even at that she has worked more trouble than profit."

The general had changed his base completely, and Tom met him more than half-way.

"Nothing mean about me; you can count the money before you deliver the goods, but you want to understand you don't carry it into your lines a bit sooner than she steps into ours."

"That will suit me. How are you going to work it?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of your courting certain death; and if I am not wide off you know something about Mrs. Melrose's shooting. She will keep you covered all the time, while I meet you half-way. If her Winchester speaks you will be dead, whatever may happen to me."

"Hurry it up, then. There is work to be done somewhere else, and it is understood both parties draw off the field when the trade is over. You will keep for another time—and that will not be far distant, either."

"All right, then. I'm coming now."

Without hesitation Reid threw himself off his horse, and with his hand feeling in his breast pocket advanced briskly in the direction of the outlaws.

At the movement the general stepped forward, leading with him the woman who from the first had been silently near his shoulder.

Facing each other at a yard's distance the two men halted. In the rear of the general was Mrs. Neville; and close behind the Sport was his horse, which had followed him at a signal imperceptible to any but the intelligent Dandy.

"Count your cash," exclaimed the Sport, tossing to the chief a pocketbook; and as the outlaw bent forward to catch it Mrs. Neville rushed past into the hands of Tip-top Tom, which were outstretched to receive her.

A wave of the strength which Reid had at his command tossed the lady on the back of Dandy,

and a touch of the hand on the bridle wheeled the horse.

"Good-by, old fellow! Steer for the Silver Bend, and I'll take to the bushes!"

He struck the animal sharply on the hip, and as it darted away he wheeled again, either hand filled with a weapon, just as General Principles, dropping the wallet, from which he had counted in large notes ten thousand, flung himself on the sport.

"Lightning blast you!" he shouted:

"Those notes were stolen from me."

The Sport had drawn, but it was only with the intention of protecting himself, if need be, from treachery. He had risked all on the fact of Merry May holding the drop on the chief, and had believed her known advantage would keep him in check. What he most feared was an attack from the men, who were no longer held under the eye of the general.

The movement was so sudden it almost found him unprepared. The arms, whose strength he had already tested, closed around his own, and held them firmly to his side, rendering useless the weapons in his hands. So long as that gripe could be retained, strength, courage and science would avail the Sport nothing.

"I have him foul!" shouted Kenton, a savage glee in his voice.

"Two or three rout that she-wolf out of the bushes, and the rest of you see the woman he put on his horse does not get away. There is money in her yet."

With the two men writhing and shifting it was an impossible thing for Merry May to fire without running longer risks than she cared to take. She saw the Sport had at least managed to place the body of his foe between her and himself, but a bullet that would pierce the one might go through and through the other. She held her hand, waiting for a chance, until the words of the chief recalled her to her own position.

"What will I be doing?" came grimly from her lips as she deftly shifted her aim.

Then, aloud:

"Keep back, all, or the slaughter will begin!"

"Sorry, purty," hissed a voice at her ear, as a strong hand forced the muzzle of the rifle upward, and then tore it from her grasp.

"Reckon you didn't think we knew 'nough ter drap out a skumisher or two. It's a shame ter treat a woman so—help ther boss, boys, I hev ther she-wolf myself!"

"You think so, ugly?" grated another voice, as the body of the road-agents lifted up a shout in answer.

An iron fist shot forward, stretching out the fellow whose hand was clasping Merry May.

"It war ther only thing ter do, an' I ain't sorry a bit. Tally one more fur Patent Pete, an' his practical plumbin'."

The double change was worked so suddenly that before the rush could begin Merry May had caught up her rifle and was once more ready to take the drop. The weapon was already rising to her shoulder when Mira, who had been coldly watching the scene, without taking more than a spectator's interest, sprang out in front of the Black Masks.

"Hark! Listen!" she exclaimed.

"There is no time now for more of this foolishness. Your lives are in danger, save yourselves while you may! When they come out to take the den of the Masks be sure it will be with a stronger force than you can resist. Make ready to retreat. Don't you hear them coming?"

Alarmed by her words the outlaws halted on the threshold of the fight and listened.

The gallop of horses was plainly to be heard, and it was not the sound of Dandy's departing footsteps, either. In the brief period their ears were turned in that direction the noise appeared to increase in volume. Something like a panic seized the men, and Mira alone turned to the two forms that were now writhing together near to the ground.

She advanced with a troubled look on her face. It was time this conflict ended, and the outlaw chief was away, yet she shrank from the bloodshed through which seemed to be the only way out of the dilemma. As she approached, the Sport wrenched one arm loose.

Swaying his body out of the way he struck a lightning-like blow with the point of his elbow, and then gave a wilder wrench than ever.

At that he was free altogether, and wheeling on the instant stood covering the general with his two derringers, one in either hand. A touch with a finger and the battle would be over.

Tom was breathing hard from his exertions, but was as cool as ever.

Never once turning his head toward the men whom he could not help but remember must be perilously near, he kept his eyes fixed on his foe, ready to note his slightest movement, while he muttered:

"I can't do it, Herbert Kenton, or whatever your name may be; I can't do it in cold blood. Hold your hands up and step out. When you see your chance, take a shot at me if you want to, but I can't shoot down an unarmed man, and there is too much at stake for others to tell you to draw where you are standing."

Without a word the outlaw wheeled and walked away. He knew now, beyond a doubt, of what sort was the man with whom he was dealing, and had no fears of a shot in the back. And his quick ears had also caught the sounds which had alarmed the rest.

He as well as they knew that a fusillade would but hasten the coming of the force, and guide it directly to the spot. Their own numbers were too few at present to welcome a fight, and the moment for retreat had come. So long as Merry May skulked in the bushes there would be no effort to dislodge her, while General Principles shielded Tom Reid, as he stepped away his own body being between him and them.

If there had been no other element in the game the outlaw chief and his men would have gone away unmolested.

But Patent Pete, having helped Mrs. Melrose out of trouble, had been biding his time, while he watched the struggle going on between the two men. Unless necessity compelled he was not likely to turn loose on the "boys," but history has shown he had no great love for the chief.

He stepped out through the screen by which he had been shielded. The steps of the horses sounded nearer than ever, and he had not a moment to spare if he wanted to get in any work before there were other spectators on the scene.

"One holy minuit, gen'ral. I'm Patent Pete, from Silver Bend, an' I hev bizzness with yer. You tried ter play me dirt on sev'ral occashuns an' now I'm hyer ter even up. Ah! Would yer?"

The general turned on his heel as though it was a pivot, and threw up his right hand. He was no coward, even if he was willing to accept quarter when the fight went against him, and there were two shots fired—with Patent Pete's a shade the quickest.

Then there was a still nearer rush of footsteps, and Major Burton and his crowd burst upon the scene.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

REVELATIONS AND REUNION.

THE shot and the charge hastened the retreating footsteps of the outlaws to a mad rush. Before Mira had raised the head of her fallen father from the ground they were back to their horses, into the saddle, and away.

In the rear of the major and his men came Mrs. Neville and her daughter. They rode hesitatingly; yet it had been impossible for either to go away and leave the man who had risked so much for them to his fate.

They found him unharmed, and standing with something of a look of regret on his face, watching Mira as she bent over her father.

The girl was as cold as ever, to all outward appearance, even though she knew the wound that showed redly through the center of the Black Mask had been instantly fatal.

"I warned him against it," she said, looking up at the women who were coming to her side with all the sympathy of her sex. "He would not listen, though, and this is the end of it."

"And who in the name of Heaven are you?" asked the major, looking from the face of Mira, now unmasked, to that of Nellie Neville, who stood beside her mother.

"I am Herbert Kenton's daughter. At least, I was when he was living. Who I will be now it is hard to tell."

She spoke wearily, and then turned her face back to the dead.

"And your mother?" continued the major.

"Was Annie Lyle, my sister," spoke Mrs. Neville, apparently as much astonished as any one, but answering for the girl since she did not answer for herself.

"And now, sir, who are you?"

The query was sternly put, and yet as though the possible answer might be dreaded.

"Here I am known as Major Burton; but once upon a time I dropped the name of Burton Neville. Whether I ever take it up again depends somewhat on what you have to say; and, perhaps, how much you will pardon."

The two stood facing each other, trembling with emotion, agitated with doubt, thrilled by the strangeness of the scene, and the wonderful shock of their meeting.

The men whom Major Burton had led to the spot had gone swirling away in pursuit of the outlaws of whom they had caught a glimpse in the distance.

Merry May had come out of the bushes with her undischarged Winchester in her hand, and her face both sterner and sadder than usual as she drifted to the side of her husband.

Patent Pete had slipped to the shoulder of the Sport, and as he came he whispered:

"I left ther boys at ther Black Kenyon, an' I reckon they won't bother this section longer than they kin take ter find we ain't comin' back. They've made ther divvy, an' are swearin' by you. It'll be an awful dissep'tment. You'll stand by me, pard, same ez I've stood by you?"

"Be sure ov it," was the terse answer.

"But I spared the man, and I would as soon have let some one else do the shooting."

"He did that some time previous; I war on'y gittin' back at him when I had ther chaine. I don't see what's in ther wind hyer, though."

"Listen, then, and you will find out. I'll be ready to talk to you later on."

"I sot 'em on ther right road," piped the immature treble of Handy Sim, who was giving a little tug at the elbow of the Sport as the latter turned away from Pete Potter.

"It war me ez throwed ther cheer at Lerry McGhee's, an' put out ther lights. Oh, I tell yer, I bin 'round, all ther time."

"You are a dandy, and that is a fact," answered the Sport, kindly but with less interest than he would have shown at another time.

"Wait till the trouble is all over and I'll make it square with you if it is in the wood."

The major and Mrs. Neville—the major and the woman who once was his wife stood facing each other in a silence that lasted a minute or two before it was broken by a sharp cry from Nellie, who sprang to the side of her mother.

"Don't you see she is fainting?"

"And no wonder," answered Burton faintly; "I feel that way myself."

He put his hand to his breast and staggered back just as Nellie caught her mother in her arms.

Tom sprung with her, and was in time to help ease the unconscious woman to the ground; while a moment later the major was bending over the lady as she opened her eyes.

"There is much to be forgiven," he muttered; "and I am the sinner among ten thousand."

"There has been, there must have been, some horrible mistake," murmured Mrs. Neville, fixing her gaze on the face of her husband. "I had proof that you were dead. Explain it all."

"And I thought I had the evidence of my own eyes that you were worse than dead. This then," pointing to Nellie, "is our daughter, and that," motioning toward the unheeding Mira, "is theirs."

Taken up with the tragedy in their own lives they forgot for the present the more horrible one in that of the outlaw's child.

The few words explained the cross-purposes and beliefs which had been wrecking two lives. From the looks that came upon the two faces it was more than likely there was to be safety in port at last.

"If I had only known your sister," groaned the major, with a yearning look in his face.

"True, I had heard of her, but how was I to know how, line for line, her face was yours? and that her child was the image of ours? In the glimpse I had of them I could have sworn to both; and Herbert Kenton's looks were impressed upon my mind for a lifetime."

"I followed madly, wildly, and at the first but a train behind."

"An accident threw me into hospital for a month, and after that all trace was lost."

"I never thought of going home. Home! I had none. I drifted away; and after years of wandering saw the man I had sworn to slay. He was behind a black mask then, but I recognized the figure; and afterward I saw the face."

"The rope seemed to be a sweeter revenge than the rifle. I bided my time, and at last had the proofs I needed, for I bought over several of his men, whom I had reason to suspect; and finally timed my coup, and was waiting for the arrival of the men who were to attack him in his lairs, when I saw our daughter."

"At first I thought it was you."

"Then I knew I was wrong, and believed her to be our daughter, on her way to join the man whom, perhaps, she believed to be her father."

"At all costs I would have saved her from being caught in the explosion that was to come; and though my every effort in her behalf seemed to be a failure I was building better than I knew. After this I can have no more doubts; and will ask for no more explanations. What I want—shall I have it?—is pardon."

The major told his side of the story after the stern, earnest fashion of the man.

It mattered nothing to him that other ears than those of his wife and daughter were listening; and when Mrs. Neville feebly stretched out her hand he did not hesitate to seize it and raise it to his lips. He was only too eager to seal his forgiveness before them all.

Miss Neville was the slowest to be convinced.

What she said, with unwonted sternness in her voice, makes no difference now, for she, too, was pacified, and in the end convinced.

The wife who so long had thought herself a widow was wise enough to take the major at his word, for the present, at least. Her strength was not equal to explanation, and she wanted time to collect her thoughts, and tell her story once for all. What she did say afterward can be briefly summarized.

Some years after the mysterious disappearance and supposed death of her husband, her sister died, and from that time on, for years, she heard nothing of Herbert Kenton.

Then, a little fortune was ready to come to her, that would have been divided between the two sisters, and she came West to seek for proof of Annie's death, and to offer to share with Annie's daughter if the child still lived.

She discovered where Kenton was living, and report had it that he was well off, though little was really known in regard to him. It now

seemed to her that the man must have already heard of the fortune, and taken his own way to secure to himself more than the share which should have fallen to his wife. He met her on the road, though she had not recognized him; and the rest the reader knows as clearly as she was able to explain it. Whether she had any ulterior intentions, beyond obtaining her acknowledgment for the money which was to go as her ransom, she could not say; and prudently did not allow herself to guess. The man was dead now, and it was hard to tell whether his daughter truly sorrowed for him or not.

The money Kenton had acquired as chief of the Black Masks had vanished. Even the ten thousand handed to the outlaw by Tip-top Tom had disappeared. If the Sport had spoken he might have blamed Patent Pete for that; but the ex-road-agent had aided him too well, when that aid was needed, for him to interfere where the actual ownership was so doubtful; and perhaps it was as well not to lay any stumbling blocks in the way of Potter's further reformation. At any rate, the prosperity of the Practical Plumber seemed to have increased about that time, and he drifted away in search of a broader field for honest operations.

Mira was provided for, however. The major had enough of his own, and to spare, and the legacy Mrs. Neville had been interested in eventually found its way into her hands. The law did not trouble the young lady, and it is doubtful if her conscience did. She dropped out of sight of her relations, and they heard of her no more.

Tip-top Tom, knight-errant, received due thanks and deep apologies from the major, and Miss Nellie showed herself sufficiently grateful. Probably she said and did nothing more than was properly due under the circumstances, but Merry May laughingly hinted something about Miss Neville being an heiress, and handsome to boot, and that it would not be a bad thing if gratitude should turn into something stronger. She advised Tom to linger a little, and see.

"No, I thank you," laughed Tom. "I am abundantly provided for already. Fact is, I am to be married on the fifteenth, and am on my way to claim the blushing bride. I wouldn't wonder if she was a little anxious, for the time is growing mighty short; but if Dandy don't lame, or lose his feed, I'm going to get there, just the same!"

And the next morning the gallant Tom rode out of camp and the Sport was lost to Silver Bend.

THE END.

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